

Voices of Refugee Women



Tales from women seeking asylum



WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR
PEACE & FREEDOM
UNITED KINGDOM

We are UK WILPF.

WILPF is the oldest international feminist organisation still active today. We campaign for human rights, women's participation, disarmament and justice in our integrated approach to peace. Our section here in the UK is entirely run by volunteers and has branches across the country.

The theme of our 2017 Autumn Seminar was Voices of Refugee Women. This choice of theme arose from the current political context; we are increasingly living in a misinformed, reactionary and hostile world, particularly for women and refugees. With conflicts, natural disasters and oppressive regimes sadly rife across the world, more and more displaced peoples also need support. We can no longer stand by and do nothing.

We therefore wanted to use last year's Seminar to let refugee women themselves set the record straight on what life is really like for women refugees here in the UK. We deemed it important to put refugee women and their testimonies centre-stage, and hoped to show our solidarity with and support for such women across our country.

This booklet contains some of their stories. Starting with a narrative report covering what was said on the day of our Seminar, it hopes to raise further awareness. We want to give our thanks to WILPF International for awarding us their Movement Building Grant, which helped fund the day itself, and has made this booklet possible.

We need to counter this ugly rhetoric which has been gaining traction across our country. Women need to stand up for other women. And we all need to stand up for those who are vulnerable and in perilous situations.

To find out more about us and our work go to our website www.wilpf.org.uk, or find us on Facebook as UK WILPF and Twitter as @UKWILPF.

UK WILPF welcome refugees!!

UK WILPF, February 2018



On Saturday 25th November we held our 2017 Autumn Seminar, Voices of Refugee Women.

Our aim was to show solidarity with refugee women and raise awareness of what life is really like for refugee women in the UK.

Our executive committee members Marie Lyse Numhosa and Taniel Yusef chaired the morning session. Eleven refugee women were invited to speak about their experiences.

Our first speaker described the process of arriving in UK as a refugee. She told us how the hardest part is being the recipient of a 'culture of disbelief' espoused by officials from Home Office. She said how there is absolutely no support for the women on arrival in UK, nor advice on how to present their case to start the application for asylum.

Our second, spoke of her traumatic experiences of being not believed and trying to survive as a homeless woman on the streets.

The third woman to speak spoke about surviving since 2006 as a woman without documents. She described the effects of 'hiding' herself from everyone – she dare not tell people who she really is.

The fourth, detailed the indignity of

being an 'asylum seeker'. She had a good job prior to entering the UK, and so wanted to work here. She originally took a post earning £38,000 a year, but when the authorities found out, she was detained, 'imprisoned' and had to work for £1 a week. She felt exploited all over again, this time by capitalist practice.

Our fifth speaker, talked about suffering racist abuse in her own country. After entering the UK, she then experienced domestic violence from her husband and became mentally ill. She would like to see UK policies changed to prevent destitution of those seeking asylum.

The sixth refugee woman told us how she become a refugee because of her resistance to the dictator of her home country, whose corrupt government was propped up by the West. She has to exist on £36 a week and has been denied access to health care. She told us, however, that she really appreciates signs saying "Refugees welcome here".

Our seventh, recalled how she was kidnapped and found herself moving from country to country. She eventually had to marry for protection. In time, the government of the country where she was staying gave her money, paradoxically making her more vulnerable, to return to Africa. There, she was abused again. She is

still today separated from her son, as she could not take him on the journey to the UK for fear that he would get hurt.

The eighth woman to speak told us how a normal ransom demanded of families for kidnapped women is \$50,000 – these kidnappers telephone families so that they can hear their relative being tortured to make sure they receive their money.

“the ‘refugee crisis’ is a problem of the Global North, and ... people who seek refuge... should not be stigmatised nor blamed”

Our ninth woman could not speak English, and so another spoke on her behalf. It was expressed how without hope she was, but she still wanted to be present to add her own witness of the hardships and sadness faced by refugees.

Our next speaker now works for an NGO, and supports other refugee women. She told us how Europe cannot admit to its Imperial past, and how today’s refugee crisis is a product of our history. Britain is not the pillar of Human Rights that it claims to be. Rather it supports a cycle of destitution, detention and despair –

with women being left for 10 to 15 years without papers. She urged us to campaign for refugee rights.

Our final speaker fled Africa because of her sexuality. She told us how once in the UK you fear being sent back. She detailed how women suffer the pain of separation from their children – but how the Government consistently refuses to allow children in as they refuse to believe women. Women only become ‘refugees’ after spending years in limbo.

From the women’s testimonies, it was highlighted how women seeking asylum have great difficulty in understanding how to present their own case. If they want to appeal against deportation they have to gather enough information to convince a lawyer that they have at least a 50% chance of success before they can qualify for legal aid. This is really hard if you are new to a country, know no one and are scared.

Throughout the day, there was a shared understanding that the ‘refugee crisis’ is a problem of the Global North, and that those people who seek refuge in Europe should not be stigmatised nor blamed. By the end of the day, participants were all in agreement about the importance of solidarity and different groups working together to make changes.

Sarah's story

My name is Sarah. I am previously from Uganda. I came to the UK seven years ago. I fled my country because I was a victim of domestic violence and abuse from my previous partner, whom I lived with for 11 years and had three kids with. My mum and dad used to tell me to just stick in there because you have your kids around and it's in our culture - you're not supposed to separate from your husband. So, I stuck in there and was able to endure the pain that I went through.

I felt so lonely... but because I was young and naive I thought maybe he loved me. So, I fell for it. I was subject to torture. If I didn't do the housework properly he would grab me, put me on the wall. So, I got traumatised, physically, emotionally. I was living with an alcoholic, he would come back late at night and do all sorts of havoc.

Then one day, he came back and said that, 'I want you to go away from this house'. And I said, 'Why, I have three kids with you, where will I live?'. He said, 'No no, I'm not going to have a discussion with you, just leave the house'.

He followed me around saying, 'You're still in the house, I told you to leave the house'. At the time I had

just had my third kid. He was four months old.

My husband left the house and came back at about one o'clock at night. I tried to hug him, to tell him to come back to me, but he pushed me so hard against the wall that I blacked out.

When I came around, I ran out. It was now around five o'clock in the morning. I ran, I ran I ran. I hired a motorcycle to take me home, to my parents.

“I was subject to torture... I got traumatised, physically, emotionally”

I was so traumatised that I was in a depression. I was sick, and so I told everyone that it was over. I filed for a divorce. It took me three years, because in our country there is no rule of law. There's too much corruption. I got a lawyer to help my case, but my ex-husband would buy my lawyer to drop my case. He had lots of money. So, I would go to court and the guy would not even come to represent me.

My case took so long. And my ex-husband kept on saying, 'I have to finish that woman. I have to kill her'. He was stalking me everywhere I

went, making me fear.

When the divorce was over I was told that I would have six months before I could move out of the country or have any relations with another person. We were given joint custody, because the kids were young.

“And that’s when I became homeless”

But, after six months I was allowed to be free from every kind of legal obligation. My brother-in-law came over from the UK to Uganda and saw how I was suffering. He asked my sister if they could bring me over to the UK with them so that I could have a new and safe life here.

But, when I came over here to her house I began suffering again. The same abuse began again. Torturing me, assaulting me. It was just her, not her husband. She thought that I was with the husband, so I was pushed out of the house.

And that’s how I became homeless. That was in 2011. I didn’t know what anything meant, I didn’t know anything. I began doing all sorts of ordinary work, taking people’s kids to school. I met people, strangers. You think you are friends, but then they also go and harass you. Do things

that I cannot even explain to you. They happened to me here.

And then in 2013 I met a friend. They asked if I had a home, I said no, I didn’t have any permanent address - I would often sleep in churches. For survival. And then that’s when I met my boyfriend.

This friend said she had a relative, and said that he seemed lonely and was a nice person. He’s also from my country. She said that she thought that we shared some characteristics. And so she said, ‘I think that I will hook you up’.

And that is where I am now, we are now together. We hope to get married. Because I am now an asylum seeker and looking for refugee status, when I get my papers I will be able to go back home and see my kids.



Renee's story

My family is from South Germany. We were just an ordinary family, and were not religious. There were thousands of families like that all over Europe - Jewish families who were not religious. That was how we lived, and it wasn't really until Hitler came into power in 1933 that we noticed a difference.

“it wasn't really until Hitler came into power in 1933 that we noticed a difference”

The local children would often ask you if you were a catholic or a protestant - I never knew quite how to answer that one. We had a very normal, nice life in Germany. My parents were very into art, and had a lot of artistic friends.

In 1933, Hitler started causing bother, he wanted to annex as many countries around Germany that he could, and do away with people who weren't of the pure race. And so, by 1936 to 1937 we noticed things get a bit difficult. My dad lost his job in 1937, and then we had to leave the flat. Our landlords apologised, but they had to obey the rules. We stayed with friends for a while, but they had to go too. And then we went to Berlin to stay with my grandmother.

My dad was sent to a concentration camp, a place called Buchenwald. Lots of relatives also disappeared to camps. My grandparents luckily negotiated to get my dad out of the camp, with the help of Sweden, Canada and money.

We applied for this *kindertransport* thing. I don't think that I was aware for quite along time what was going on.

So, we went through the process, which included a lot of queuing up and going to offices. By that time we had to have these new identity cards, with a great big J printed on them, and I was given another Jewish name for my own name. This was before the yellow star, which happened not long after we'd left.

It took a long time, but eventually a foster family in the UK was found for us - we were offered ours on 11th May 1939. I actually had the flu at the time, but we discussed it and I said, well let's get on with it. So, off we went, my brother and I, with our cases packed.

“we had to have these new identity cards with a great big J printed on them”

We could take one favourite toy in our backpacks; my brother took a stamp collection, as he was a grown up - well he was 13 by then. They took this off him at the border. Which was so typical. We went on a train to Holland and then on a ship to the UK.

“The people who accompanied and looked after us during the journey over really have to be mentioned...”

We arrived in Liverpool Street Station. There, we went to this great big gymnasium, which is still around today. We were sent to Birmingham with three sisters.

The people who accompanied and looked after us during the journey over really have to be mentioned. They were volunteers, most of them quackers, and were young. Mainly the ages between 18 and 24. They travelled between Germany and England, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and places like that. They didn't know whether at any time this could come to an end and they would be stuck in Germany. So, they were very brave. Remarkable young people.

Our wonderful foster parents met us at New Street Station. We had a really ideal time there with them because they had a big garden, which

we weren't used to being in a flat.

My mother managed to get over with one of the last ships, which was mainly filled with English people who suddenly realised that it was maybe a good idea to leave. She came right at the end of August, and just a few days later war was declared.

We saw her, but we didn't live with her until about four years later, which was wonderful. They managed to get my dad out too, in the end. But he went straight to America, because there were no jobs in England.

The day we became naturalised British citizens was wonderful for us. I was seventeen. It was a proud moment. It wasn't dead easy when we first came. I was called a German spy a few times at school, and stuff like that, because people were ignorant. But on the whole people were pretty wonderful. I think that we were just very fortunate.



Elizabeth's story

I am from Ghana. I came here in 1999, so it will be 19 years this April since I first arrived.

I had just finished secondary school and I met someone through a friend. We made a plan for me to come and study in the UK. That's what I thought I was coming over for. However, I had actually been trafficked into the UK for forced prostitution.

I travelled with that person. So, there were no alarm bells or anything. The only thing that I questioned coming over was the visitor's visa.

I was 19.

I was trapped with them from April until September. Within that time I managed to sneak out and make a few phone calls, and then managed to completely get out of the situation. I literally got out because my door was unlocked.

I managed to contact my sister, who met me. She didn't know where I was when I contacted her initially, but she knew I was in danger. She had been in the UK for around 15 years when this happened. She is British, she married here, she is here legally.

When I got to hers I told her about what happened. I was absolutely

terrified. So, we got in contact with a solicitor, who worked for an advice centre in East London. I was advised to go to the police.

There was another problem though. When I came here I did something called an oath. So, I was terrified of exposing what had happened to me to the Police, because I was warned about what could happen if I did this. Around that time when I was making my mind up of what to do my parents had a car crash with my two brothers. So, I just link that to this.

The solicitor did send a letter to the Home Office in the end. I wanted to claim asylum because my sister didn't think that it would be conducive for me to go back home after that.

“I had actually been trafficked into the UK for forced prostitution”

The letter was sent, someone apparently signed for it. However, nothing happened. We kept going back to them. Knowing what I know now, I was naive. I could have just walked into the Home Office and claimed it myself. But at the time, because I was 19, I was terrified of the system.

Things moved on. I worked illegally. I had to survive. I chose to survive. So,

I ended up with this immigration situation, having no status here.

In 2015, I was arrested and put in Holloway Prison. I thought, you must be joking. I've claimed asylum. But, they were like no. Luckily I had a copy of the paper that I had claimed asylum with originally, with the postal order receipt. So, we contacted the Home Office.

When I spoke with them initially they said, no we don't believe you. Later on, after examination of my case they then said, fine. So, I got my reasonable grounds. But, I was still put in Yarlswood for five weeks.

They put me there because I didn't have a status. However, before I had gone into Yarlswood, I had already been given my reasonable grounds. I just didn't know what to do with it. So, I was just left there for the five weeks, because my solicitor was on holiday.

I was determined not to lose. I knew that I was right and I knew that I had done everything right. So, we threatened them with unlawful detention, and within two minutes I was let out -- to nothing. I had no support. They were supposed to send me to The Salvation Army, but they just said go.

This is when I realised that there is a huge problem with women seeking asylum and refugee women. I thought

it was just me. I started working with all these groups and I realised that there are actually women who have been living in this country for years with no status, who are constantly without status. They've done everything, put in their application, and the Home Office is just treating them like numbers.

“In 2015, I was arrested and put in Holloway Prison”

These women are struggling, and some of them are homeless. I had the experience of having to survive on £36.95 a week. And you think, once you've bought your bus pass which is £21.20, how the hell am I supposed to live?

I will never forget, because I was living on Bagels, eggs and hot chocolate. That's all I could afford for two and a half years, until they finally decided to make their minds up.

It's just been such an abrasive journey for me. But, I guess I've come out on the other side.

My dreams now are to complete my education. I am doing my foundation in law at a university here. And whatever happens I am going to go on and do my degree in law. I am going to major in constitution law.

We want to thank our wonderful, brave contributors and all the strong women who came and spoke at our Autumn Seminar last year!! Your stories are so important and we hope that they will help to change attitudes in this country!!

We also want to thank WILPF International for the Movement Building Grant that we received, without which none of this work would have been possible.

Thank you to Paula Shaw for all her hard work in organising our Seminar last year, and her help in coordinating the contributors for this booklet.

Thank you also to Astrid Pertuisel and Isadora Moura for helping with the interviews.

Commissioned, edited and created by Isabel Bull, February 2018.



WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR
PEACE & FREEDOM
UNITED KINGDOM