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My name is not ‘asylum seeker’: countering silencing, unhearing and labelling in the UK asylum system through co-research

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Photos by Rasha Kotaiche

Introduction

> ‘To be an asylum seeker, it’s like to have a tattoo on the forehead with all those 12 letters. Many people don’t like us, the most of them don’t understand why we are here, they don’t know our stories and have their own conclusions’ (Nelson).

> ‘Having been in the asylum system for four years, my dreams have shrunk. My dreams are those of a meal in a nice place, nice clothes and friends. I wasn’t like that, but with time passing in waiting for my case to move reality sunk in. Perception towards life changes. As long as I see another £40 in the coming week, it’s all that matters. Forget self, forget food of your choice, forget clothes that proper fit. As long as you see tomorrow with a roof on top of you. I wondered if I could fail to recognise me just within four years … what about those that have waited for more years. Is there even a piece of them

> left? I doubt it. It's costly, you trade you to live far from wars, abuse or human trafficking, whatever the case may be. Who am I, who will I be, what have become of those that have gotten their paper? I don't know' (Faith).

These are difficult times for those seeking sanctuary across the Global North. We only rarely hear their voices, not because they cannot speak, but because asylum policy is framed in such narrowly defined terms as to dehumanise and cast those seeking refuge as a 'burden' (Jeffers, 2012; Darling, 2016; Abby et al., 2021). As Arundhati Roy has remarked 'there's really no such thing as the "voiceless", there are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard' (Roy, 2004). Deliberately silencing and unhearing combine with acts of labelling as powerful political and bureaucratic tools through which 'a client group', here asylum seekers, are defined (Zetter, 1991: 44). The act of labelling inevitably entails stereotyping, delinking, and control (Zetter, 1991), and, as Nelson's words above powerfully remind us, the 'asylum seeker' label imposed by the state is like 'a tattoo on the forehead', there for all to see. In this chapter, we want to tell a different story, one that centralises the experiences and voices of people in the asylum system. Drawing on ethnographic co-research, we focus on the challenges those seeking asylum face, and the insights they provide into the damaging powers and effects of silencing, unhearing and labelling.

The chapter is cowritten by two TCRU (and so university) based researchers (Mette Louise Berg and Eve Dickson) and two co-researchers with personal experience of the asylum system (Faith Nyamakanga and Nelson Gómez). The material on which our chapter is based also draws on research by co-researchers 'Abby', Misbah Almisbahi, Sanaa El-Khatib, and Arsalan Ghasemi, all of whom have experienced the violence of the UK's asylum system. The Nordforsk-funded research presented here forms part of a multi-sited ethnography in Denmark, Sweden and the UK, exploring how solidarities are imagined and practiced in negotiations of migrant deservingness.

We want first to tell a story about the research process we embarked on together, starting from the particular juncture at which the government's hostile environment policy (Jones et al., 2017), a fragmented and privatised asylum system (Berg and Dickson, 2022), and the COVID-19 pandemic collided in Halifax, a town in West Yorkshire, an asylum dispersal area in England. We will then share what we learnt about experiences within the asylum dispersal system.

Co-research in times of COVID-19: fostering conviviality and solidarities

We begin in the autumn of 2020 when Eve and Mette set out to start research on dispersal housing in Yorkshire, a historic county in northern England. At this point in time, Yorkshire, as well as the rest of the UK, was under COVID-19-related lockdown measures, with instructions for everyone to stay at home. We were unsure about how to proceed with our planned in-person fieldwork; Yorkshire, only hours away from London by train, was firmly inaccessible. Asylum support organisations we reached out to were barely managing, overwhelmed by the challenges of working remotely and struggling to meet the needs of people in the asylum system, many of whom did not have wi-fi at home and had only recently arrived in the UK. It was clear that the pandemic was intensifying pre-existing pressures and precariousness in the asylum system, including inadequate housing and digital exclusion. The pandemic also saw an increase in the use of so-called 'temporary' accommodation, often hotels. Anti-migrant groups were trespassing in hotels that were housing asylum seekers and posting hostile videos online fomenting hatred (Taylor, 2020; 2021) – events that our co-researchers were acutely aware of, and which informed some of their ethnographic responses which we draw on here.

Our research focus on asylum-dispersal housing took on a different kind of urgency in this context and we decided to embark on virtual, 'home-bound fieldwork' (Horton, 2021), working in partnership with St Augustine's Centre, a local organisation in Halifax that supports refugees and people in the asylum system. With their help, we recruited six co-researchers with personal experience of the asylum system, among whom were Faith and Nelson. The co-researcher group included three men and three women at different stages of the asylum process, from five different countries across three continents. None of them, apart from Nelson and his partner Abby, knew each other beforehand; all were keen to contribute to the research project to make a difference.

At the outset, Faith produced a hauntingly powerful audio message setting out her reasons for wanting to become a co-researcher, and centring the importance of voice and lived experience:

> 'I want to be a researcher because I am inspired by an Akan proverb which translates: "If you do not tell your story, be sure that someone else will, and they would not tell it right". I want to be a researcher because who is better to tell the story of asylum living conditions

> than the people actually living and experiencing the system? I want to be a researcher, I want to help bring out the Black and African voice, or rather the experience of Africans in the asylum system. I want to be a researcher because it makes me feel, look, and act like a Superwoman, a Superwoman that will maybe, at the end of the research, help solve at least one, at least two, at least three, or perhaps all of the asylum accommodation problems' (Faith).

Through weekly online meetings, we started a learning and research process scheduled to last five months. Each meeting would start with an icebreaker activity, so we gradually got to know each other. We would then move to the training part, sequenced in six phases: ethics; ethnography and autoethnography; visual methods; focused conversations; data analysis; and dissemination. Between each meeting, co-researchers would generate ethnographic material, which could be written text, audio clips, video, still photography, or a mix of these.

Mette and Eve sought to forge collaborative and nonextractive relationships with the co-researchers and research participants (Back and Sinha, 2018). We designed the training process iteratively and developed it through dialogue and listening. Every week we would design training material and plan sessions in response to the discussions we were having in the co-research group. We set weekly prompts for the co-researchers and asked one or more of them to share their responses with the group every week. Most people in the asylum system are not allowed to work, so we compensated co-researchers for their time with mobile phones, data packages and vouchers. We also provided certificates of participation, organised a webinar on access to higher education and sanctuary scholarships, and have offered letters of reference to the co-researchers. Interviewees were compensated with vouchers.

From the beginning, we recognised the importance of group-building and group dynamics. We wanted to avoid transactional encounters and establish the research process as a space of conviviality and support (Phoenix, 2019). Group meetings were followed up with one-to-one conversations between university researchers and co-researchers to ensure everyone felt included, and to address individual questions or issues. Doing research and training online set certain restrictions, but also enabled participation and inclusion as co-researchers were able to fit the meetings in with care work and other commitments.

Although none of the co-researchers had ever studied ethnography, they quickly grasped its potential. From the start, the co-research process produced rich and nuanced ethnographic material, which prompted

further reflections and discussion, leading to the generation of more material. We found that solidarities, a key concept in the research project, were also enacted in and through the research process as co-researchers shared their stories and group members supported one another. We were all moved when Misbah shared a piercing video about the challenges of surviving on £40 per week (see https://solidarities.net/gallery/), and we listened with bated breath when Hedi shared his story of receiving first a letter to tell him he was allowed to work because his qualifications were deemed to be on the so-called 'shortage occupations list', and not long thereafter another letter to say his asylum application had been successful. The shortage occupations list, of mainly specialised occupations, is determined by the UK Home Office (the government department dealing with asylum applications). People seeking asylum who have been waiting for more than 12 months on their claim 'through no fault of their own', are allowed to request to seek permission to work if they are qualified to work within one of the occupations on the list (Law Centre NI, 2022). Faith reflected on the co-research experience:

> 'The most challenging part for me is, you know, sometimes we had to share our stories and when you're in such a space you can't hide your emotions, you can't suppress them. When you're telling what you've been going through and all of that, you can't suppress your emotions, you can't hide, so I think that was challenging, you know, like, I believe at that time you just break down, I believe at times your voice is shaking, this is really upsetting, you can't believe what you've actually been going through. Those kind of awakenings were challenging'.

As well as drawing on their own experiences, the co-researcher group also conducted interviews with third-sector workers and other people seeking asylum, drawing on their language skills, which included Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish Sorani and Spanish. Interviewing other people in the asylum system was at times challenging, as Faith explains:

> 'This research involved other asylum or sanctuary seekers, listening to their stories. Yes, you know, you might be going through it, but there's another person actually going through worse than you. It was a bit challenging hearing what people were going through, especially people that are educated, people that were doctors, that had professions, like doctors and lawyers in their own countries, and then they're just, all of those years of investment in education is just put on hold. It was challenging to hear that as well'.

The co-researchers were keen to share the insights and understanding they were developing through the research with other people in the asylum system. When St Augustine's Centre held an open day in June 2021, they organised a stall about the research project, centred on raising awareness of rights and making a difference in the real world.

At the time of writing, nearly a year after the co-research process ended, one co-researcher has moved away from Halifax to study at university elsewhere; two have found work in the asylum and refugee support sector; two have moved away from Halifax in search of work. Our WhatsApp group is still active and the friendships we established are continuing.

In the rest of this chapter, we focus on the everyday experiences of people in the asylum system in Halifax. The photographs are by Yorkshire-based Rasha Kotaiche and were taken in the spring of 2022 during a walk-along with Mette and Faith, based on a list, generated by the co-researcher group, of places and spaces that are significant for people in the asylum system in Halifax.

The UK asylum system: hostile, fragmented, privatised and under-resourced

The Home Office is the government department responsible for and overseeing the asylum system and making decisions on asylum applications. Yet the asylum support system, including accommodation and support provision for people awaiting the outcome of their asylum application, was fully privatised in 2012. This means that asylum support is set completely apart from the mainstream welfare system and services are provided by for-profit companies, operating through complex subcontracting arrangements. In 2020, the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee found that the Home Office lacked 'an effective line of sight into how [asylum] services are delivered locally' (Public Accounts Committee, 2020).

In the UK, as in other European countries, asylum seekers are subject to dispersal on a no-choice basis, but not all local areas host people in the asylum system. Dispersal areas are places where 'there is a greater supply of suitable accommodation' (Local Government and the Home Office, 2019: 4), which in practice means cheap or hard-to-let housing, often in deprived small towns and rural areas in decline, with few services and poor public transport (Gill, 2009), reflecting wider social and geographic inequalities in the UK. Under the privatised system, dispersal of asylum seekers to places that have 'strong institutional capacity and

better housing' has decreased (Alonso and Andrews, 2021), and concerns have been raised about the dispersal policy potentially 'undermining the support and consent of local communities' (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2018). Reports by parliamentary committees and third-sector organisations have repeatedly pointed out the substandard service and conditions that people in the asylum system are subject to, including dirty, unsafe and uninhabitable housing (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2018), issues that were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (British Red Cross, 2021).

Asylum application processing is under-resourced with a large backlog of unresolved cases (Hewett and The Refugee Council, 2021), and there is a growing number of people who have been waiting for longer than six months on a decision on their asylum application (Migration Advisory Committee, 2021: 31). This means that in many cases, people will spend months or even years living in substandard dispersal accommodation (Hewett and The Refugee Council, 2021).

During the period of waiting, while their asylum claim is being processed, most people seeking asylum are not allowed to work, or to open a bank account. There are very limited circumstances in which a person seeking asylum may be allowed to work. It is possible for people seeking asylum to apply for the right to work, but only if they have been waiting more than 12 months for an initial decision or a response to further submissions. However, even if granted permission, people seeking asylum will only be able to take up employment if a job is on the UK's shortage occupations list. There is limited state provision in the form of cash and accommodation for those who are deemed 'destitute' or at risk of destitution. The maintenance support of £40.85 per week is, as co-researcher Hedi put it, 'just enough that we don't die'. It is paid via a prepaid debit card called ASPEN, which enables Home Office monitoring of expenditure and movements (Privacy International, 2021), and makes asylum seekers immediately identifiable in shops. This mode of governance is part of a broader regime of surveillance and border securitisation targeted at ethnic-minority groups in Britain, particularly those seeking asylum, who in recent years have been especially demonised by both media and state (Webber, 2022). Alongside the increasing criminalisation of 'undesirable' migrants, more generally, the British government's preoccupation with securing the borders against small-boat Channel crossings has resulted in increasingly punitive tactics of control, such as plans for physical pushbacks and the recent initiative for 'offshore' processing of asylum claims in Rwanda.

The Home Office has a duty under human rights law to adequately support people in the asylum system (Mayblin and James, 2019), yet the experiences and testimonies of our research participants tell a different story, one of a fragile and fragmented system with inadequate support structures and charities stepping in to 'fill the gaps' (Mayblin and James, 2019). Nelson writes about his and Abby's experience, they mention Migrant Help which is a charity contracted by the Home Office to offer a telephone helpline to people in the asylum system.

> We came to the UK at the beginning of 2020, stayed in a hostel in London for a few days, and then, we were moved to another town, far away from there. We shared a month with many other people seeking asylum, some of them spoke our language, but most spoke others very strange for us. Our diet was the same every day for a month: cereal, milk, boiled eggs, and toast for breakfast; canned minestrone soup, chips, and salad for lunch; a special dish for dinner, maybe fried chicken, lasagne, real meatballs (I mean not canned). We made a few friends there. None of us had money to get more things, like to get different food or medicine. We were not allowed to work.
>
> We got our accommodation just three days before the lockdown, so we didn't have enough time to get to know our town or make friends. It was a very disgusting time. I remember when we arrived at the flat. There were two chairs, a table, a sofa, a stove, and a fridge. Our bedroom with an old double bed. We just had our luggage and phones; no money, no food. The woman from MEARS (the company who provides accommodation) gave us our ASPEN [card]. It was Wednesday afternoon. And we went to look for a supermarket and get some food. We were so happy because finally we could eat the food we wanted. We tried to pay. "Your card was declined", said the Lidl [supermarket] cashier. Very embarrassed, we left the supermarket and went back to our 'new' flat.
>
> We heard about St. Augustine's Centre. The next day we were there to get some help from them, even not knowing what kind of help they offer. They helped us to enrol in the NHS system and to call Migrant Help about our card and lack of money. The answer from Migrant Help was: "You have to wait till next Monday. Look for a food bank".

We now turn to the local context in Halifax and the experiences of living in dispersal housing and finding support.

Living in Halifax and finding support

Halifax is a former mill town in Yorkshire, located within Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council, and has been a dispersal area since the early 2000s. Most asylum seekers in Halifax live in Park Ward, an ethnically diverse and densely populated central area, ranked among the ten-per-cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the country (Ministry of Housing, 2019).

Asylum housing conditions were poor (see Figure 12.1), something that came up repeatedly in our interviews with people seeking asylum and those supporting them in third-sector organisations, and which echoes what has been found in other research (Asylum Matters, 2020; Mort and Morris, 2020: 44). Houses are often inadequately furnished and equipped, and housing providers are not contractually required to supply even basic items or amenities such as wi-fi, vacuum cleaners, or TVs (Home Office, 2019: 17–18, 22). Among the co-researcher group, Hedi had no TV in his house during the pandemic; he was stuck at home for long periods of time and would have liked a TV to help him learn English. Abby and Nelson were provided with crockery and cutlery for just one person in their flat for couples. Sanaa had large holes in the floor of her kitchen in the house where she lived with young children.

Figure 12.1 Alleyway in Park Ward. © Rasha Kotaiche.

Research participants talked to us about difficulties they experienced in maintaining their accommodation themselves without cleaning equipment such as a vacuum cleaner. Participants also talked about the challenges of sharing a house with others who might have different standards of cleanliness. One participant described sharing a house with someone who would lock themselves in the only bathroom for hours and play loud music.

To report issues, people in dispersal accommodation are required to call a national phoneline, contracted to and operated by the charity Migrant Help. Participants described repeatedly attempting to get accommodation issues resolved, including leaks and boiler breakdowns, through calling Migrant Help and contacting their housing officer, but said they were 'ignored' and forced to resort to approaching third-sector organisations for advocacy support.

Our co-research group felt strongly that private housing providers were more likely to respond to third-sector organisations than those seeking asylum themselves. This tended to be understood by co-researchers as being a consequence of their position as 'asylum seekers'. They felt they were not deemed to be 'deserving' of the same respect or rights as other residents in the UK, often being treated like they did not 'matter'. This is the logical outcome of government and media rhetoric that for decades has sought to dehumanise and demonise those seeking asylum and legitimate differential treatment (Sales, 2002; Darling, 2021). As Faith put it:

> 'Asylum seekers are human, they are not a statistic … you ring Migrant Help, they want a number, a reference number … No, I'm Faith, I am a face before I am a number, I am not a statistic'.

Many participants talked about the significance of support organisations and groups such as St Augustine's Centre, Sisters United, and Light Up Black and African Heritage Calderdale, where they felt they had been able to find a sense of community, make friendships and give and receive support:

> 'So, in St Augustine's Centre I met with many people. There we can see each other and … we can find friends. In St Augustine's Centre, it's a good place for asylum seeker really. Really useful for classes, English class. Like DIY [do it yourself] group – they have a DIY group, you can help, you can start to work, like volunteer, so that's good when we are asylum seeker, we are not allowed to work, so that's a good place to spend time, you know, not stay at home sleeping' (Arman).

Passing time, waiting in limbo

As we found, rather than providing opportunities to rebuild lives, the uncertainty of the asylum system means that asylum seekers live their lives in suspension. This resonates with other research, which has shown waiting as an integral part of asylum policy (Rotter, 2015; Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi, 2020).

> 'When I saw this picture [Figure 12.2], I instantly thought of all the time we had to wait to get our status. Since you arrive to the airport, starts the "waiting time", which can be years. In our case it was about three years, but I've known about cases of people who had to wait for 7 or 10 years' (Nelson).

This is the context within which those caught in the limbo created by the UK's asylum system nevertheless endeavour to build their lives and find a sense of belonging. As Faith puts it: 'It takes a fit mind, soul and body to walk this asylum journey'.

Figure 12.2 Clocks in shop window. © Rasha Kotaiche.

Foodbanks and volunteering

> 'At this Methodist church [see Figure 12.3], there is a Food Bank, which was a very symbolic place for us. When we arrived to Halifax for the first time, we didn't have more than £1 and didn't have any food. The ASPEN card had nothing on it till next Monday, and it was Wednesday. We got to the food bank, and they shared some canned food with us, which gave us some relief for a while. It's really hard to remember that time.
>
> It's very difficult and sad to feel yourself alone, with no friends, money, food, in a place which is not yours, without your culture and language, in a situation like this' (Nelson).
>
> 'We used to attend the community fridge daily at the mosque [see Figure 12.4]. They offer food every day to everyone who needs it. It's a big help for people seeking asylum, who don't have enough money for food or other needs, as they are not allowed to work' (Nelson).

As well as receiving food and support, many research participants also described volunteering at local foodbanks and organisations as something that gave them a sense of purpose and helped to distract them from the uncertainty of their cases and the 'empty time' that resulted from not .being allowed to work – a strategy to defend against the limbo of asylum policy (see also Rotter, 2015).

Figure 12.3 St James's Church, Halifax. © Rasha Kotaiche.

Figure 12.4 Halifax community fridge by the Jamia Madni Mosque. © Rasha Kotaiche.

> 'It really helps people to do volunteering and be involved [in] some activity. It helps people with mental problems. Here at home, I'm doing nothing, because I'm not allowed to work. I am asylum seeker – I'm getting crazy' (Ravrov).

Building a new life

The impossibilities of building a life in a new place while being kept in enforced destitution and barred from working, having little control over one's life, and being suspended in time while waiting for a decision on their asylum application, were felt acutely by those involved in our research. Research participants described the cumulative negative impact on their mental health and sense of self-value, as well as the constraints imposed on making and maintaining relationships and meaningful lives. Poor accommodation conditions meant many interviewees were unable to invite friends round. This was exacerbated by having to subsist on very low financial support:

> 'I haven't been in the cinema for four years because it's very expensive. And I never afford myself to bring my friend, or make friends because I'm afraid, because you are not allowed to work and you have not enough money to pay for a cup of coffee or a bottle of beer or something – it's just like discrimination towards asylum seekers who are waiting more than three years, four years, or I don't know how many … if you are asylum seeker, you are not a person, you are nothing, because you have no [national] insurance number' (Ravrov).

Figure 12.5 King Cross Road, Park Ward, Halifax. © Rasha Kotaiche.

> 'This picture is my everyday life [Figure 12.5]. I walk through this road almost every day to everywhere. The air is different, it's filled with different aroma, used cooking oil from a local fish and chip shop, the chicken spice from a chicken and chip shop. Then there is Mother Hubbard, I would say is the best. With some dessert shops as well. This street is my go-to street when I want to treat myself to something special. Some within my ASPEN budget. Even that comes at a cost. I would have to sacrifice some basic food just for a chicken chip or a bigger sacrifice to get Mother Hubbard' (Faith).

Concluding reflections

The UK asylum system is fragmented and fragile (Asylum Matters, 2020). Support for those inside the system is outsourced to private companies, with the third sector 'filling the gaps' where the UK government fails to fulfill its obligations according to international law (Mayblin and James, 2019). Waiting times for asylum decisions are long, leaving many to spend months and even years in dispersal accommodation in enforced destitution, barred from work and with very limited opportunities to rebuild their lives (Hewett and The Refugee Council, 2021). It is a system deliberately designed to be hostile and to produce 'intense social

exclusion' (Sales, 2002). The power of labelling, silencing, and unhearing have the effect of stripping victims of their dignity, and 'rather than offering them refuge through care and understanding, it causes them further distress' (Bralo, 2022: 72). In this chapter we have counterposed the hostility of the asylum system by foregrounding words by people with personal experience, claiming their right to dignity, belonging and humanity. In Faith's words:

> 'I may be a refugee, I may be an asylum [seeker], I may be a migrant, but I need you, we need you, and I believe, we all need each other. … Take a moment and think about it. Yes, I am an asylum seeker. We are asylum seekers. We are refugees. We are migrants. But, we are also human, just like you'.

As Faith and Sanaa, wrote together (https://solidarities.net/my-name-is-not-asylum-seeker-on-labels-dignity-and-respect/):

> My name is not 'asylum seeker'. Yes, being an 'asylum seeker' is a part of me, but I'm more than that. I am a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a friend. Society labels asylum seekers as if we are different, as if we don't belong. Yes, we are different. We are stronger than everyone else. The sacrifices we make on a daily basis are unimaginable. But have you ever wondered why people are seeking asylum, why are people leaving their country? Everyone has their own dark, upsetting reason to flee their country. But, it's starting to seem as if asylum seekers are less than humans.
>
> We are people. We have rights. So, respect and feel for us. Welcome us and call us by our names, because my name is not 'asylum seeker'.

Further reading

The research presented here is part of the international research project Migrants and Solidarities: Negotiating deservingness in welfare micropublics (https://solidarities.net/); more information can be found on our website, which includes several blog posts written by the co-researchers. Our approach to collaborative ethnography has been deeply informed by the book *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented immigrants and new directions in social science* (Alonso Bejarano et al.,

2019); we have found it an inspiring resource for thinking through the process of co-research from a social justice perspective. Jonathan Darling's book *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the denial of asylum* (Darling, Pluto Press, 2022) provides a lucid and critical account of the political geography of asylum dispersal in the UK, while Lucy Mayblin's *Impoverishment and Asylum: Social policy as slow violence* (Mayblin, Routledge, 2019) documents the British government's purposeful impoverishment of people seeking asylum in the UK. Patricia Hynes's book *The Dispersal and Social Exclusion of Asylum Seekers: Between liminality and belonging* (Hynes, Policy Press, 2011) offers an overview of the asylum dispersal system in the UK and how it has been experienced by those seeking asylum over the years.

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