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Nogugu Mafu
Institute of Technology, Tralee

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Seeking Asylum in Ireland

Nogugu Mafu

Community Development Student, Institute of Technology, Tralee

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to relate in brief the story of my life as a refugee in Ireland. It will focus on my reasons for leaving Zimbabwe, my home country, and some general reasons why people find themselves in a position where they should make the very crucial decision to either continue to live in their own country and deal with whatever hardship or persecution, give up and stare death in the face, or move to another place and contend with the challenges of trying to fit in and survive.

Writing from a personal point of view, these challenges will obviously be based on my own experiences, which in my opinion reflect to a reasonable extent the experiences of most refugees, while at the same time not assuming that there are no exceptions. The challenges will include my life as an asylum seeker in direct provision (accommodation centres designated for people seeking asylum), as a single mother away from the support of family and friends, and as a refugee trying to start a new life in a foreign country. Another aim of this document is to clarify the difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee, terms that to some people very often have the same meaning.

The paper will also give a brief overview of the general treatment of refugees worldwide not only in Ireland or the western world. Finally, I wish to use this article to give words of encouragement to all the displaced persons of this world who may get a chance to read this article, to help them realise that it is possible to have a "home away from home" and to rise above the dehumanising experiences of being a refugee. It is my heartfelt wish, too, to extend my humble gratitude through this article to different statutory and voluntary organisations and people who have devoted their lives to the worthy cause of helping asylum seekers and refugees in this country and indeed in other parts of the world.

Introduction

As social beings, there are many things we do, not only for ourselves, but because amongst other things, they help us identify with those groups of people or individuals who matter to us, like family, friends, the society we live in or the nations we belong to. A sense of belonging gives a sense of security, which is one of the basic needs that have to be fulfilled for a person to live a meaningful life. Refugees and asylum seekers very often find that they are robbed of their security and cheated out of their 'sense of belonging'.

They are persecuted and tortured by fellow human beings for reasons best known to the torturers. Sometimes they are even victimised by their 'own', for example in the cases of some African countries such as Zimbabwe and Sudan, where innocent people find themselves having to deal with worse hostility from their own countrymen than they ever experienced at the hands of their 'colonial masters'. At other times refugees and asylum seekers become victims of natural disasters, such as the 2004 Asian *tsunami*. Whatever the source of affliction, they usually wake up to the cruel realisation that the existing physical, political and other conditions just do not permit them to remain, and therefore they flee their own home countries, give up their 'sense of belonging' and seek to save their lives and 'belong' elsewhere.

Upon arriving 'elsewhere', in supposed safety, experience has shown that they realise in no time that their hopes and dreams of being accepted as a part of the new host community are elusive dreams, the chasing of which becomes a permanent feature of their refugee lives. What happens thereafter can be described by each individual in his or her own words, because each person often figures out their own way to live with it. This makes the life of a refugee or asylum seeker a sad life of battling each day nature provides, to be recognised as a human being and to find somewhere to belong.

I was born in Matebeleland, a part of Zimbabwe whose history of marginalization dates back from the pre-colonial era. I endured, together with the rest of the people from my tribe, the pains and frustrations of constantly fighting for my rights, screaming for my voice to be heard and yearning to be treated with dignity.

When the situation in Zimbabwe progressed from bad to unbearable, I left the country in February 2002 having lost my husband and father to my son. He (my husband) was one of the many unfortunate casualties of the unjust political system of Zimbabwe which denies people their freedom to choose a political party of their own liking, in a so-called democratic country. As it became clear that my own life was in danger too, I had to make the desperate decision to leave my family, relatives and friends and venture into the unknown with a six-year-old innocent child. This was undoubtedly the most courageous and yet difficult decision I have ever had to make in my entire life.

In Ireland, life as an asylum seeker was a life of daily, mental torment. At this stage, it is perhaps appropriate to clarify in my own understanding the difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee. I must admit that it has not been easy to find a single definition of the term. Put in plain language, the term asylum seeker refers to a person who arrives within the borders of a country and seeks protection from a life-threatening situation of persecution. In one of the articles written by the Irish Refugee Council, entitled "A Guide to the Refugee Act 1996 (as amended)", an asylum seeker is referred to as "an individual making an application to be declared as a refugee". According to an Information Leaflet issued to people seeking asylum by the Refugee Applications Office, a refugee then is "...a person, who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country..." Before a person is declared a refugee, they go through an interview or interviews to ascertain whether they meet the criteria set out in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) guidelines on asylum and refugee issues. Once a person has been declared a refugee, they are afforded (in principle) the same rights as any average Irish citizen, including the right to work. However, asylum seekers in Ireland are denied the right to work.

During their wait for the refugee status, asylum seekers are often accommodated in Direct Provision Centres. These are accommodation centres where they are provided with lodging facilities. At these centres nearly every decision about their lives is made for them. This includes what they will eat and when they will eat it, where they sleep, what entertainment they will avail of; in short, someone else determines how they will

live their lives. Needless to say, that this creates in the asylum seekers feelings of helplessness and dependency, robbing them of the dignity which comes with being able to make decisions regarding one's life.

For me, living in a 'Direct Provision' accommodation centre was both alienating and dehumanising. I quickly noticed that in addition to people having negative perceptions about my being a black African woman, the fact that I was an asylum seeker conjured before them even worse images. Very few people would look at me and see a vivacious and energetic woman ready to take up life's challenges and contribute positively to Irish society, or even a courageous survivor ready to embrace the second chance that life rarely offers. Regrettably, many people would probably look at me and immediately see a lazy African woman coming to sponge and drain the country's social welfare system, or worse still, an object to be despised and loathed. It was not surprising therefore within the hostel to get such comments like, "Jaysus lads! Ain't ye folks so lucky to have such a great holiday, being fed and paid to sleep?" from some members of staff. Outside the hostel, if it was not a derogatory remark like, "Hey darkie, what's the latest news from the devil?" it would be a look so despising that I would immediately wish I could just vanish from the face of the earth. Little did these people know or care to know that for asylum seekers, living in the so-called 'holiday' conditions, with nothing to do and all the time in the world to think about the dreadful past and the uncertain future, was reducing us to helpless, institutionalised zombies.

In addition to the traumatic social environment within the hostel, it did not help the situation much that my son and I, all of a sudden, had to share one small room, which had to be an all-purpose room, ranging from lounge to playroom and bedroom. Coming from modest and yet comfortable conditions according to our own standards in Zimbabwe, this obviously had a negative impact on my son. He could not understand why we had to be there in the first place. If I had already been distressed by people's remarks and attitudes towards us being asylum seekers, it broke my heart every time my son asked such questions like, "When will we go back to our house?" or "Will my Dad ever come back to us?" There were so many things I just could not find appropriate words to explain to a six-year-old.

When I finally got my refugee status, I felt like I had just earned my ticket to freedom out of the mental prison, as one can imagine. I would move out of the hostel, look for a job and live a normal life once again. I would shake off the asylum seeker stigma and perhaps get people to notice that I was in every way as much a human being as they were. Most importantly, I would try and give my son as normal a life as I could possibly afford. Sadly enough, my dream would not come true so easily and so fast.

Getting accommodation in the community was a nightmare - as soon as the foreign accent was detected, the house was no longer available..., but it would still appear in the *Weekly Advertiser* every Friday. At the job market the only options available for a refugee were (and have always been, except in very few instances) the menial, low-paying cleaning jobs, regardless of one's qualifications and competences. When I eventually got a decent and responsible job to run one of the asylum seeker accommodation centres, I thought Lady Luck had finally smiled down at me, but little did I know that my qualifications and capabilities were not really an important part of the equation. What mattered was that as a foreigner and vulnerable refugee, it would be quite easy to exploit and manipulate me. I worked as an administrator in a centre that accommodated nearly a hundred residents from different parts of the world. It was a challenging job with many responsibilities attached to it. I enjoyed it despite the fact that I got paid way below the rate that my counterparts in similar positions were getting. What nearly destroyed me was watching, every day, members of staff and residents alike being treated like sub-humans and I on the other hand being manipulated into maintaining this unacceptable practice.

When one gets used to a life of constant fighting and struggling for recognition as a human being whose intellectual, physical and spiritual faculties are fully operational, one can tolerate certain devious and degrading circumstances only to a limited extent. There came a time when I thought I had taken enough and so once again I had to assert myself and fight for my rights to be respected and treated fairly at the work-place. Unfortunately, as is usually the case, I was replaced overnight, and left out in the cold with a child to raise and the challenge of going back to the struggle of sending CVs and being continuously rejected simply because I was born on the 'wrong' side of this planet. It did not help much either that I carried the 'refugee tag', which, instead of denoting safety and security, is regrettably a permanent mark which

is used to disparage and exclude a group of people from many basic human rights - sometimes, ironically, even the right of survival itself.

Out of curiosity and frustration, I have been reading on refugee issues and from the little knowledge that I have gathered and analysis that I have made, I have come to the conclusion that the plight of refugees, forced immigrants or internally displaced persons happens to be the same world over, it is not exclusive to Ireland or any one country, although the degree of the sadistic treatment may possibly vary from one place to another. Take my own home country for example. The recent scandal, widely known as "Operation Restore Order" or "Operation Clean Up Towns", a campaign by the government of Zimbabwe to forcibly clear up slum areas across the country, has affected an estimated 2.4 million people, leaving most of them homeless and internally displaced. Children, the elderly, HIV/AIDS patients, amongst many other defenceless groups of people, were left out in the cold, destitute, and the government continues to turn a blind eye. According to the February 2006 article compiled by The Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) (an organisation monitoring public attitudes towards migration,) many of those who have tried to escape these atrocious human rights abuses and fled to neighbouring countries like South Africa have ended up behind bars, drowned or eaten by crocodiles in the Limpopo River.

Another crisis that has resulted in a large number of internally displaced people on the African continent, is the Darfur crises in Sudan. In the UK, asylum seekers from Sudan have had to face cruel and inhumane immigration policies. The UK government has been piloting a scheme whereby all failed asylum seekers have their social housing and all other social assistance withdrawn from them, leaving them "destitute and threatening to take their children into care, to coerce them into going back home", (*The Guardian*, 26 January 2006). Examples of these human-perpetrated atrocities could fill a thick volume and one just wonders how, in a world that preaches human rights, this brutality continues unabated.

While the displacement of people, as a result of crises, is a worldwide phenomenon, this obviously does not make it legitimate or right. Perhaps it might help other people in similar or worse circumstances than mine to know that they are not alone in their predicament, that there are thousands of people, some of whom have lost their lives,

fighting for their rights as citizens of this world. One of the crucial steps in challenging perceptions about asylum seekers and refugees is to throw away the 'victim' mentality and attitude and begin to see ourselves as people who deserve every bit of respect and happiness we can get. It is only then that we will be able to summon enough courage to confront the day-to-day destructive stereotypes formed about us. It is important never to give up but to soldier on and keep the hope that one day things will change. We (refugees and asylum seekers) have to work hard to try and bring about that positive change, no matter how small it may be or how long it may take.

It is a great consolation to know that amidst all this pain and suffering, refugees and asylum seekers are never alone in their struggle, which is why I wish to extend my humble gratitude and to acknowledge the selfless and diligent work that has been done by many human rights organisations, groups and individuals to fight for the rights of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in general. To mention just a few (without implying that those not mentioned are less helpful), I would like to thank Irish organisations like the Irish Refugee Council, the Ethnic Minority Forum of the HSE Southern Area, Caidre, the Immigrant Council of Ireland, SIPTU (Killarney), Killarney Asylum Seeker Initiative, Tralee Refugee Support Services, Partnership Tralee, Kerry Action for Development Education (KADE) and many other organisations and individuals in the different counties of this island, who have not only worked tirelessly to help asylum seekers, refugees and foreigners integrate but have become an unwavering pillar of support, which we so desperately rely on, for our life-long struggle of survival.

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