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Separated Young People Seeking Asylum - Standing Alone?

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Introduction

Liberty Street House is a Health Service Executive South service whose main work is with young people 'out of home' or at risk of being homeless. We are based in Cork City and since January 2001, we have also provided services to 'separated children seeking asylum'. We work with both groups of young people under section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991.

The first separated child seeking asylum was referred to our service from the Immigration department at Cork Airport in February 2001. Working with this group of young people presents us with ongoing challenges and dilemmas. Separated children seeking asylum are the most vulnerable group of asylum seekers. They are strangers in a foreign country without parents or carers and are thrust prematurely into independent living. From our experience of working with these young people, we find that they may suffer psychological trauma from their experiences before they arrive in the country. The continuing difficulties and stresses which they experience after they arrive include loneliness, language barriers, racism and anxiety about the asylum process.

The main role of our service is to provide accommodation to the young person and build a supportive relationship, which will help them through the asylum process. We complete an individual care plan to examine how best to support and safeguard their needs. We act as advocates on their behalf to ensure that they receive the best possible service from the agencies they come into contact with; for example, Office of the Refugee Application Commissioner (ORAC), Refugee Legal Service (RLS), Health Service Executive (HSE), voluntary bodies, Schools and other community and state services.

Liberty Street House in partnership with University College Cork ran a conference called "Guests of the Nation", which took place in April 2005. We welcomed the

opportunity for the voices of the young people to be heard and Liberty Street House staff facilitated a group of separated children to explore the key themes and issues for them within the asylum process. Following ongoing discussions with this group, the "Stand Alone" video was recorded and presented at the conference. The young people in the video presentation described their experiences in relation to a number of issues including;

- The Asylum Process
- Accommodation
- Education
- Racism

This video provided our service, conference participants, and community groups with a unique opportunity to learn from these young people's experiences, to listen to them and to critically reflect on our own professional values and responses as service providers. It also facilitated us in reviewing our services and approaches to working with this service user group. The issues identified by the young people were used as a basis for developing of best professional practice. The next section reproduces verbatim what the young people said in the video about their experience of asylum. The paper concludes with a brief analysis of policy and service provision in this area. The names of the participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Personal Perspectives of Separated Children Seeking Asylum in the HSE Southern Area. 'Stand Alone' DVD Transcript:

Introductions

"My name is Abde and I'm from Zimbabwe and I've been here 3 years and six months"

"My name is Daniel and I'm from Ghana, West Africa and I've been here 4 years next month"

"My name is Blessing I'm from Rwanda and I've been here eh about 18 months"

"My name is Iosef I'm from Moldova and I'm in Ireland 1 year and 1 month"

"My name is George I'm from Moldova and I'm here in Ireland 2 years"

Asylum Process

Abde: "The justice system of immigration, I can never understand em why someone has to stay 3 years, 4 years or even 5 years without getting an answer from immigration. From the point of view, from my point I see that anyone who spends 5 years without a result from immigration, they're' wasting 5 years of their life"

Emmanuel: "I'm waiting 4 years up to now so I just don't know- you don't know what will happen tomorrow. Either you going home, either you stay. You're not even feeling happy you know, so you just are not even happy if you are doing anything you just thinking about immigration."

Blessing: "So like I just don't understand, em, it's like it's like I donno the good Samaritan – the way he helped somebody who was sick. You just bring somebody in to your house you help them but then how can you throw the person out who is still sick just throw the person out when they are still sick. Its better I think it's good if you just take them inside – help them to heal"

Abde: "To be clear, not depressed you have to think about it like; it's the business way of doing things. Don't put too much faith into a system"

Blessing: "Waiting for the result you don't know where you are standing- either you are staying or going. It just kind of hard. If it was going to like to come in a short period it would be kinda better. It's a matter of life and death – it would be like the next day you maybe deported or something like that – just, just so hard for us"

Accommodation

Abde "Its like landing in Prison – my reason being is no one here can handle being looked upon every move and being judged on. Like I know its safety rules, I know it's this but like - he didn't like it, I didn't like it – expecting the same thing- I didn't get the same thing. And I'd confided in that place, I had to rebuild myself again just surrounding the system and left there and I've done that again and I had to rebuild and start up again like..... I moved on and moved on."

Blessing: "It was like a hostel and I had my own room- it was kinda nice- it was lovely. It was good it was close to my school but now I live in a better place. I live in a family – I have em a brother and a sister- they are twins. They are my new family. So now I have a dog and a cat. It's nice to live there but sometimes I think what would happen if I would be like moved from there things, would be like everything would be torn apart for me. Just I think it would be kinda difficult for me – but for now, I'm good."

Josef: "I lived with a family- I've always lived with family. I was very happy there. They did for me everything and never feeling I'm different or I donno what. Huh, em after I, I growed one year up- I'm semi independent now"

Daniel: "So sometimes it's difficult to live alone – maybe 2 years, get your independence, house, doing everything. Independence. But later they want to send you back to hostel, its very difficult like in the hostel you stay there maybe more than two years and they want to send you back to hostel, how can you going to be happy or maybe concentrate your school your exams or stuff, its very bad so."

Abde: " We didn't go back to our families – we went back home to our own rooms – where we had to prepare the day, we had to cook for ourselves – we had to manage our time and that is pretty difficult and like I don't know if that's a service, and that's what the service provides and sometimes we are in hostels with homeless, homeless people and their behaviours might impact on us because we don't behave like that.

Education

George: "I learnt to English, after boats, working boat - after I go to UCC University for a computer class - I have very good Social Work. She helped me about school, about language go to the school for language. I not, I not speak very good English. I have two years here in Ireland. It is good. For Irish people, it is good."

Blessing: "I'm also worried about that the thing where you are finished school and you only finished your Leaving Cert. I will be doing my Leaving Cert next year but I'm worried about next year what will be happen 'cause if I finish my Leaving Cert I won't

be able to go to college- then I will be like not able to do anything – I will be staying at home doing nothing”

Abde: “It’s like you’re doing it for nothing – at the end of the day we did it because we just wanted to improve ourselves – that’s why we do it – we just avoided looking at it as being college – we did apply for colleges, we didn’t get good responses but we just have to go to colleges to better ourselves. There is nothing else you can do if we had our heads stuck in the system – the time we are going to school – we never going to make it through school because it’s if you get so much cause, during school all three of us went to school we went through interviews in Dublin, we went through appeals, we got bad letters from immigration, we got refusals and on top of that we had school where leaving cert faced you. It was really difficult, the pressure really mounted on top and there was no one to talk to about this.”

Blessing: “And eh what I was saying earlier about the Leaving Cert – we just do leaving cert to get on with our lives – once you get into the system you are just like anyone else in Ireland but once you are finished your Leaving Cert then, it’s like you would stop doing what you are doing. Then you go back, to like, as if you the way you were feeling when you came here because you have nothing else to do, but if you do your Leaving you would be thinking about study or something but if you are not doing anything then things will get worse to you. I think so.”

Abde “That’s true- the thing is if you are to studying, your mind tends to drift away from all the loneliness and pain – it gets you away from thoughts in your mind.”

Blessing: “Ya”.

Abde: “ So like that’s why we do Leaving Cert, computers and all that stuff so we can get away from all, get away from all this depression. I think I have realised that those that were in school with me, the time I was in 5th year and 6th year or 4th year, the thing is that you are in the system; you are in the Irish system. That you got friends that are Irish, you have teachers who care about you and who just want you to do good and you have social workers looking out for you that you do well in school. But the things is that once all that is over, once all this is over you’re gone. You’re back in the system – no one cares. You’re on your own feet.”

Daniel: "If you're in school the teachers will give you home work or project to do and at the same time you are going to interview thinking about you're future. The teachers don't know anything about you, what's happening to you, all your head gets messed up, thinking, thinking all the time. Especially, like the leaving cert and the asylum process, you know everything together" (he laughs)

Racism

Abde: "Irish people – the racism, it has gone down since the first time I came here but to some extent I feel that it has actually gone up a little bit because in 2, on 2 or 3 occasions in the space of a week and a half I have received like racial comments coming my way and like I just don't think that makes anything easier"

Daniel: "In my school like eh, one girl from Russia – no Irish person talk to her – everyday she sitting quiet. Nobody talk to her".

Josef: "I saw in Ireland one, I don't know whey she from- I think so, maybe Russia, was beautiful women with one boy from Nigeria – yeah I never saw that before. That is a family- they had one kid, one boy mall and I never saw that before – white & black – but now yeah, you know I saw that is no different like, what different. Everybody have one blood. For me, it is very important everyone have the same blood"

Blessing: "Most people who haven't travelled just think of us as Africans, somebody who lived in the bush and who didn't go to school and all the things about hunger and war and stuff and when they see us going to school they just don't understand – I think it takes time for them to know us - and to know who we are then like to come closer. Cause sometimes they don't understand if they don't know us."

Abde: "In school – break time come, we can try to integrate but you can see that my presence is not recognised or is not needed.

Ending

Abde: "There is nothing to go back to, some of our families have died from hunger, some of our family members cannot afford food, some of us right here we stand alone."

Blessing: "Our lives and experiences are very unique to us – we would appreciate if you could walk in our shoes for one day"

Conclusion:

For our service there are four clear messages from the "Stand Alone" video. These four messages identify the ongoing concerns & challenges for individuals and services working with separated children seeking asylum in Ireland.

- 1) **Asylum Process and Status** – The young people have clearly articulated their views about the length of the process. We know that this lengthy and psychologically demanding process has few positive outcomes for the majority of young people regarding criteria for refugee status. We were always satisfied that these young people need care and protection and would have welcomed the introduction of some form of complementary protection to be available to them in addition to the asylum process. New regulations and European Committees (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations 2006 were introduced on the 10th October 2006. We had hoped these would offer young people additional protection. These new regulations offer young people the opportunity to apply for 'subsidiary protection'. They define subsidiary protection as protection other than refugee status against a real risk of suffering "serious harm" which consist of
 - Death penalty or execution or
 - Torture or inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment of an applicant in the country of origin or
 - Serious and individual threats to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict.

While we have no young person to date who has applied for subsidiary protection it still does not offer the degree of protection these young people require. It continues

to raise the question for us as to the appropriateness of children being in the asylum process in the first instance.

Only one of the five young people in the video has been granted refugee status. The other four are still awaiting decisions.

2) **Accommodation** – We have a number of accommodation options available to us for separated children seeking asylum. These include

- Emergency Hostel Accommodation
- Supported Lodgings
- Foster Care (if the young person is under 15 years)
- Semi Independent Accommodation
- Independent Living

In the “Stand Alone” video, the young people state their preference for being accommodated within the community in supported lodgings. The isolation and loneliness of living independently at such a young age is clearly an issue from them.

Four of the young people in the video are accommodated in the private rented sector. One is accommodated in student accommodation from Monday to Friday and returns to their supported accommodation at weekends.

3) **Education & Family**: Our experience is that the majority of separated children seeking asylum have chosen to enter the education system at secondary level and to work towards Leaving Certificate standard. The experience of both young people and representatives from schools and organisations confirm that education & training opportunities encourage integration and promote self-esteem. One of the difficulties for separated children seeking asylum, identified in the video, is that on completion of the Leaving Certificate, they are not entitled to access third level education. Denying separated children access to third level education, and to work, is denying them the opportunity to progress into adulthood.

One young person is attending third level education in an institute of technology. One is studying accountancy with a company where he receives no remuneration. The other three young people we believe are working.

- 4) **Turning Eighteen:** The young people referred to the difficulties encountered on turning eighteen years and their fears of being accommodated in direct provision centres. These young people have been living with families in the community or indeed have made a successful transition to independent living and are then faced with being transferred to the adult service available. Our experience of young people being transferred to direct provision centres is that the move to direct provision compounds their feeling of isolation and marginalization and often results in psychological trauma. This institutionalization of young people in direct provision is detrimental to their well-being and is certainly not in their best interest.

None of the five young people in the video presentation have transferred to the adult services on turning eighteen years.

Liberty Street House would like to thank the young people involved in this "Stand Alone" video/presentation for the opportunity to learn from their personal experiences. It is a privilege to work with them and it only remains now for us to advocate on their behalf with regard to the difficulties they experience as separated children seeking asylum in Ireland.