Voices from inside Australia’s detention centres

Melissa Phillips

At the heart of the asylum debate in Australia there is little sense of the individual in question. People who had previously been asylum seekers in immigration detention (and are now Australian permanent residents) express in their own words the impact that detention had on them.

“When the walls are closing I feel I can’t win. I have got lost in this life.”
(asylum seeker in detention, 1998)

Between 1998 and 1999 I conducted in-depth interviews with refugees who had formerly been held in immigration detention centres. The testimonies that follow reflect the experiences of one female and three male asylum seekers who had collectively spent a total of 36 months in detention. Notably all interviewees had arrived in Australia by air, whereas most asylum seekers in detention today have arrived by sea. Three were from Iraq, one from Iran.

Moussa was told en route to Australia that he would be detained but, believing he had a strong case and that Australia was a “good country”, he thought detention would last a matter of weeks. Instead he was detained for over a year.

Abdul made no effort to hide his false passport on arrival in Australia but expected to be detained for a short time only, while his identity was being ascertained: “I thought I would be detained for a few weeks [by] people who would deal with me as a human being. Not to be isolated from the world. Five months… I didn’t know where I was. The only thing I knew was that it was a place in the airport.”

Approximately 114,473 people (including women and children) were held in immigration detention in Australia between 1997 and 2012. The average period people are held in detention facilities is 124 days (as at 31 January 2013), although the range of detention periods varies greatly.

Fatima had no idea how hard it would be inside detention. As she said, “When I was outside Australia I just wanted to arrive ... but I didn’t think it would be this way. I just wanted to escape from a risky life.” Her experiences refute recent policy discussions that rely on largely outdated notions of push-pull factors that control people’s movements.

When Amir sought asylum at the airport he was transferred to what he thought was a prison. Seeing the barbed wire fence around the detention centre made him ‘wake up’. On reflection he clarifies that “Actually, it wasn’t a prison but still for me it was. I didn’t try to cope in detention. I become a big mess.”

The daily practices of immigration detention often had the greatest impact on people. Amir explained that there was nothing to keep him busy. Rules determined what time you had to wake up and go to sleep or attend ‘muster’, the daily routine of counting people according to their identification number (not by name). Resignation soon follows. “You couldn’t raise your voice, you couldn’t [express] your rights... If you complained, they would isolate you. So... you kept quiet.” (Abdul)

Moussa had an extreme physical and emotional response to the stress of immigration detention; his hair turned grey and every day he was afraid of...
Detention, alternatives to detention, and deportation

Fencing off individual stories behind the imposing barrier of an immigration detention centre makes it easier for politicians to insert a new narrative of refugee protection – that of the ‘orderly refugee resettlement queue’ and the illegality of onshore arrival. Both are founded on myth.

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Thanks to the research participants who gave generously of their time to recount what were often upsetting memories of immigration detention.

Health at risk in immigration detention facilities

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Since 2004 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has provided medical and psychosocial support for asylum seekers and migrants held in different immigration detention facilities across Europe (in Greece, Malta, Italy and Belgium) where the life, health and human dignity of vulnerable people are being put at risk.

High-income countries have been adopting increasingly restrictive immigration policies and practices over the last decade, including the systematic detention of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers. Such policies are now implemented by middle- and low-income countries as well (e.g. Mauritania, Libya, South Africa, Turkey). In some cases detention facilities are actually financed by high-income neighbouring countries (e.g. Spain financing immigration detention facilities in Mauritania or the European Union financing immigration detention facilities in Turkey and Ukraine).

Many asylum seekers and migrants arrive in relatively good health, despite their difficult journey. However, once in detention, their health soon deteriorates, at least in part due to substandard detention conditions. Recurrent issues observed by MSF teams included overcrowding; failure to separate men, women, families and unaccompanied minors; poor hygiene and lack of sanitation; poor heating and ventilation. Shelter was often substandard, with some people detained in containers, in rooms with broken windows or even outdoors, sleeping on wet mattresses on the ground. In addition, detainees had...