

Voices from inside Australia's detention centres

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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."*

After presenting himself to the authorities, he interpreted his detention in an airport detention facility as a sign of inhospitality on the part of Australia. He was puzzled by their failure to see that he had no choice

after leaving Iraq and Jordan but to seek asylum somewhere else, and his sense of inhumane treatment lasted long after he had left immigration detention.

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 I just wanted to escape from a risky life."* Her experiences refute recent policy discussions that rely on largely outdated notions of push-pull factors that control people's movements.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

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.

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being deported. Abdul also experienced nightmares and talked of hearing voices. Interviewed more than six months after being freed from immigration detention, Amir was still plagued by uncontrollable thoughts about detention. A coping strategy he and Fatima developed was to talk with others about their problems so that *“even for a short time maybe you forget your problem and you thinking about his problem or her problem and how you can help him...”*

Fatima queried why she was placed in jail and treated as a criminal in a way that made her feel *“ashamed for everything”*. Worse still was the loneliness with no one visiting her: *“You are alone. You listen to the people [who] have a lot of friends and family coming to visit them but you wait for nothing. You know already nobody is coming to ask about you, nobody one day will call you on the loudspeaker [to say] ‘visitor for you’. Because already you know you don’t have anybody. You are alone in this life.”*

For Fatima and the other interviewees, *“the [asylum application] decision is the*

most important thing.” Preoccupied with a possible rejection, Amir took the extreme step of getting a razor so that if/when his application was refused, he could *“put the lines sometimes here”* [indicates his wrist]. Sadly there continue to be many instances of self-harm and attempted suicide in immigration detention as well as hunger strikes.

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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