

NO GIVING UP

Stories of unfinished journeys



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The Jesuit Refugee Service is an international Catholic organisation established in 1980 by Pedro Arrupe SJ. Its mission is to accompany, serve and defend the cause of forcibly displaced people. JRS has been present in Malta since 1993. JRS Malta specialises in legal aid, social work services, pastoral care and awareness-raising in schools.

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Foreword

The publication of this booklet is a positive experience for all. For the women who recounted their stories and views, the booklet offered a safe space where they could share their burden. For the reader, it gives an insight into harrowing stories that are not often recounted first-hand. For civil society and service providers, it provides a wealth of information and opportunities to learn and thus improve their services.

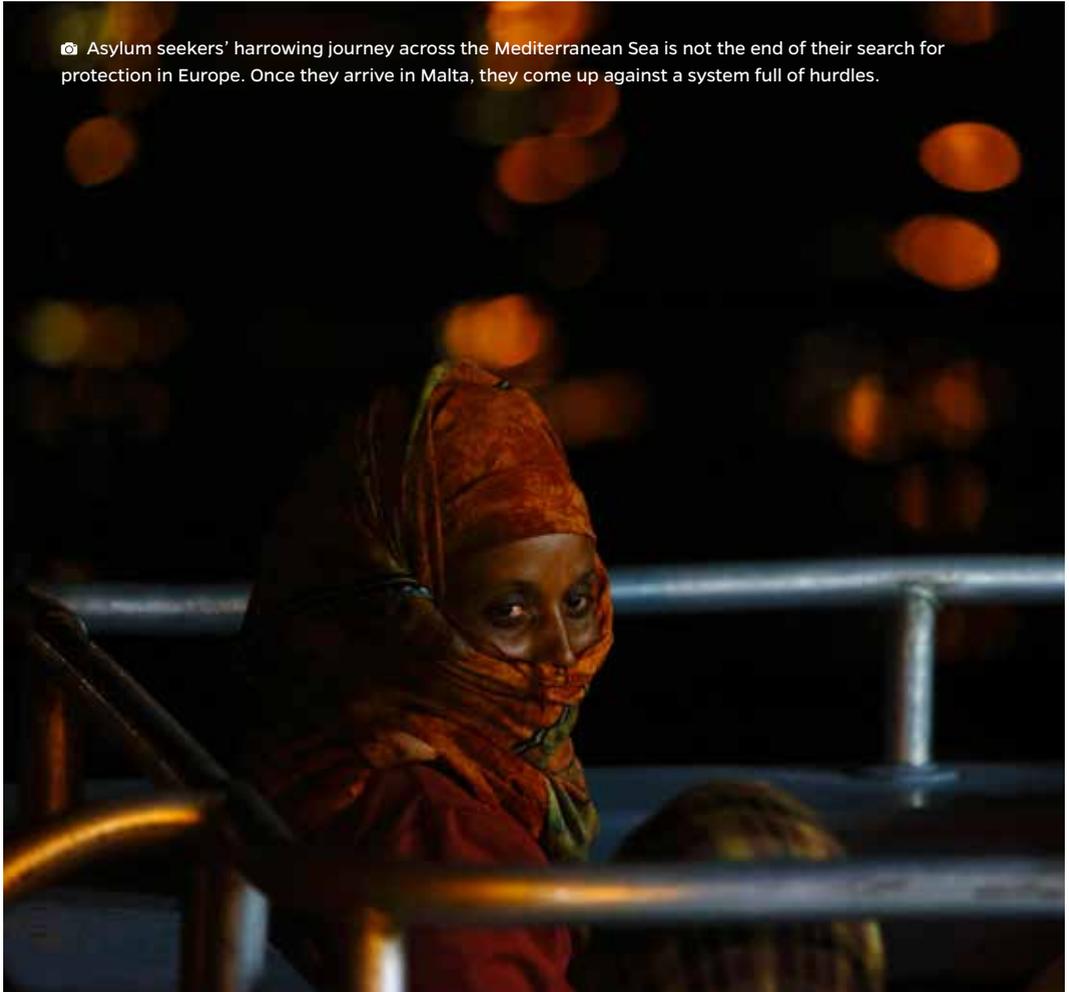
Asylum seekers face uncertainty and ambiguity about their future. The experiences of the women who contributed to this booklet shed light on a disturbing reality, where asylum seekers try to secure their rights, but are confronted with a system full of hurdles and difficulties.

Projects like this offer hope because they empower asylum seekers in their struggle to win respect for their fundamental rights. The women who participated in this project gained tools that enabled them to articulate clearly what changes they want to see in their lives, because they were given information about their rights and learned skills to better communicate their needs. The rays of hope emanating from the project are helping the women to endure their difficult situation and will surely continue to prove useful to them in the future.

This booklet will also equip readers with a better understanding of the struggles that each asylum seeker has to face. Hopefully it will help those who are in a position to make a difference to understand that detention silences the vulnerable voices behind its walls. Hopefully it will help to show that asylum seekers and refugees are not numbers but individuals who want peace and understanding – just as we do. And that they are people who bring added value to our communities. I commend initiatives like this one and applaud the women, the Jesuit Refugee Service and all those involved in the publication of this booklet. I also encourage civil society and service providers to be more active in this field and to embark on more such projects.

Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca
President of Malta

📷 Asylum seekers' harrowing journey across the Mediterranean Sea is not the end of their search for protection in Europe. Once they arrive in Malta, they come up against a system full of hurdles.



Introduction

This booklet is the outcome of group sessions held by JRS Malta with Somali women, most of whom are awaiting the outcome of their asylum application. The aim of the JRS project was to make the women aware that they could actually be active agents of change in their own lives, to identify challenges they face as migrants in Malta and to help them to advocate for improved services. This reflects our policy to include an advocacy element in our programs and to advocate not only *for* but *with* refugees.

The women who contributed to this booklet all had their initial asylum application rejected – a few had received a second rejection on appeal as well – and all were in detention when we started the group sessions. The decision to work with women who had been in detention for a long time was a natural one for JRS to take because we always prioritise people who find themselves in this predicament.

We reach out to detainees for many reasons: the JRS criteria to serve people forgotten by others; the well-established negative impact of detention; the lack of services for detainees; and the reality that detainees are usually ignored, no one really listens to what they have to say. Detention effectively blocks the voices of those behind its walls. Detained asylum seekers who have received a first rejection of their application are in an unenviable position. They know they are fast

running out of options and are largely abandoned to their fate.

The project

We held eight sessions in detention and another three outside once the women were released. Most were detained for a year before they were released, in line with government policy at the time, which stipulated that asylum seekers, whose case was not decided within 12 months, would be released to await the outcome of their application in the community. Those whose case was closed before this stayed 18 months. Today the situation has changed. The law now provides for the regular review of the decision to detain in each case, with the obligation to order release where removal cannot be carried out. So most detainees are now released well before 18 months have passed.

The group started with 19 women; some dropped out along the way but a core number remained committed to the process throughout. The group sessions explored the concepts of empowerment and human rights and covered basic advocacy and communications skills, chief among them how to choose and craft messages; and how to deliver those messages in the most effective way possible.

The women shared what human rights mean for them and what rights they feel they are missing and want to enjoy. They explained what sort of protection they want. And they came out with the messages they want to share, what they want others to hear. The messages and words in this booklet are theirs alone. They come from our discussions and from individual interviews. Some readily accepted to have their photo taken, and you can see them in the beautiful portraits featured. The women talk mostly

about their time in Malta and might be perceived as critical. But there is much to be learned from their insights. Their suggestions have certainly helped us at JRS to understand better their experience of seeking asylum in Malta and to improve the way we implement our services. We hope other service providers will benefit too.

As you will see, the women talked about their seemingly never-ending journey, from the moment they left their home country, through their transit across hostile countries, desert and sea, to the time they managed to arrive in Malta, when they embarked on their – so far abortive – quest for legal protection and for a place where they can belong.

No giving up

Our journey so far

Some of the women share their stories

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I am a mother of five and I lost my husband in the conflict in Somalia. I had no support, I tried to bring up my children but was unable to. Often I had no food for them; sometimes I would give them bread and in the evening I might get some beans or something. My life was like that, all the time, I had no one to help me, no place to go to work, but my children expected me to put food on the table and I didn't have any. At the same time, life was getting more dangerous. When I was out searching for food, I'd be afraid that I would not return home, because I would be killed. There was always fighting going on. Where I come from, there were two warring tribes, and then Al-Shabaab above, hunting these tribes and whoever lives there. So there was always danger either from Al-Shabaab or from the tribes. I saw people dying before my eyes. There was fighting and every day I would see the body of someone I know, lying on the street.

I decided to leave. I went to Ethiopia. I didn't have any documents, so I hid from police, crossed the border illegally and arrived in Sudan. There I found and joined a group of migrants and we decided to try to cross the desert together. I spent two months there, with very little food and water, in a very hot cave. We came to Sabha, in Libya, where we were brought before this man – anyone who crossed the border had to see him – who abducts people and asks for ransom money. Whoever doesn't obey will stay there, where there is beating, torture. This man also takes any woman he likes. Unless every one of the group pays, they all stay there. It took three months for all of us to pay and then he transferred us to Tripoli. In Tripoli, I was detained for three months and was finally released because I was sick. Then I managed to come here.

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I lived in a small town in Somalia. One afternoon three militia men raped me. There had been a bad clash between Al-Shabaab and another group that day. The news, that I had been raped, went around the area and I was ashamed. I returned to my farm after two months. One day, someone I knew, a young man, came to my farm just as I was finishing work. People from Al-Shabaab saw this and said, 'you have been raped and now you have committed adultery'. They declared I would be stoned as a punishment. It would not have been the first time such a thing happened in our neighbourhood. The daughter of my neighbours was stoned. They did not want the same thing to happen to me so they helped me to leave the country immediately.

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The one picture I will never forget was when we were coming to Libya. We were in a big truck, there were concrete blocks on top of 120 people. It collapsed and many people died. I knew them, we were in the desert together.

No giving up



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I used to live with my mother and father, we had a farm and we fed our family from this. We were very poor and had no crops because of the fighting in our area. We had nothing, we were getting poorer and poorer, so my father decided to marry me off to this man who had a 'better life'. That was when my problems started but I cannot talk about them here.

I managed to go to Ethiopia and from there to Sudan. Everywhere it was the same, we lived in hiding because we had no identification papers and feared arrest. There was nowhere to seek protection so I had to continue my journey through the desert. There I saw many people dying of thirst. We only had half a litre of water every 24 hours. It was so hot and humid. When the car broke down, those who were driving wanted us, who had drunk nothing for a whole day, to push the car out of the sand. It was really horrible, I saw people suffer so much. The men were drinking their urine, fighting to get each other's urine to survive.

Then I came to Tripoli. What I remember most is seeing how migrants used to sleep in their shoes at night because they were afraid the police would come and catch them. Some migrants broke their legs when they jumped the walls to get away when there was a raid. I didn't want to be always living in fear, hiding from the police or from civilians who might tell the police I am there. This is what made me cross the sea to come here.

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What we'd like to say to you

1. We believe our dignity has been destroyed

We believe our dignity has been destroyed. All our life, our dignity as women has not been respected. We lost our dignity in our country and during our journey. We came here hoping for a better future and yet we find ourselves in more difficulties, in detention, in a country where human rights are supposed to be respected. Please help us to restore our dignity.

There are two reasons why we feel our dignity has been destroyed here too. Detention takes away our dignity as human beings: we feel like animals in a cage. And the second thing is that we were disbelieved in the interview because they asked us questions we could not answer – this mistrust and way of dealing with us has taken away our dignity.



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If I am to be respected, first I need to be free, free from the bars surrounding me, free from being controlled by someone else, free to run my life.

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No giving up

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In my country my rights were violated, I could not go to school, I could not choose who to marry. My life was not mine but dictated by someone else. In the desert, it was the same, and here too I find myself in the same situation, in detention, without any control over my life, at the dictates and mercy of someone else.

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I am a married woman but a leader of Al-Shabaab wanted to marry me. I told him I have a husband but he insisted I should marry him. I know what consequences those who dare to disobey the Al-Shabaab have to pay so I left. I left alone, leaving my husband behind.

“

When I came to Malta, I thought ‘now you are in Europe and your life will be better’. When I found myself in detention, I started to think ‘what have you done to deserve being put in prison like a criminal? What did you do?’ People outside don’t want to see us, like we are sick or because we are black, we stay here because others don’t want us. ‘They don’t deserve to live with us’ – this is how they must think. Sometimes I think I will go crazy because of the way I think. When I came here I believed I would find human beings just like me. I want people out there to put themselves in our shoes, to know how bad it is to be detained.

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The Maltese rescued me from the sea and in this they have respected me as a human being but now I want to be treated as a human being again. If I have committed any crime, I have served my sentence, I have done enough time and they should release me now.

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2. Detention is harmful

Detention is harmful; no one should be detained. We want to be released; also, we want to ask that those who come after us will not be detained.

In detention, we live in fear. Every time we hear the gate clang open, we are afraid someone else has been rejected. We have nothing to do, too much time to think. We feel anxious that we are going mad. We feel ashamed, humiliated, that we have done something wrong, because we are treated like criminals.

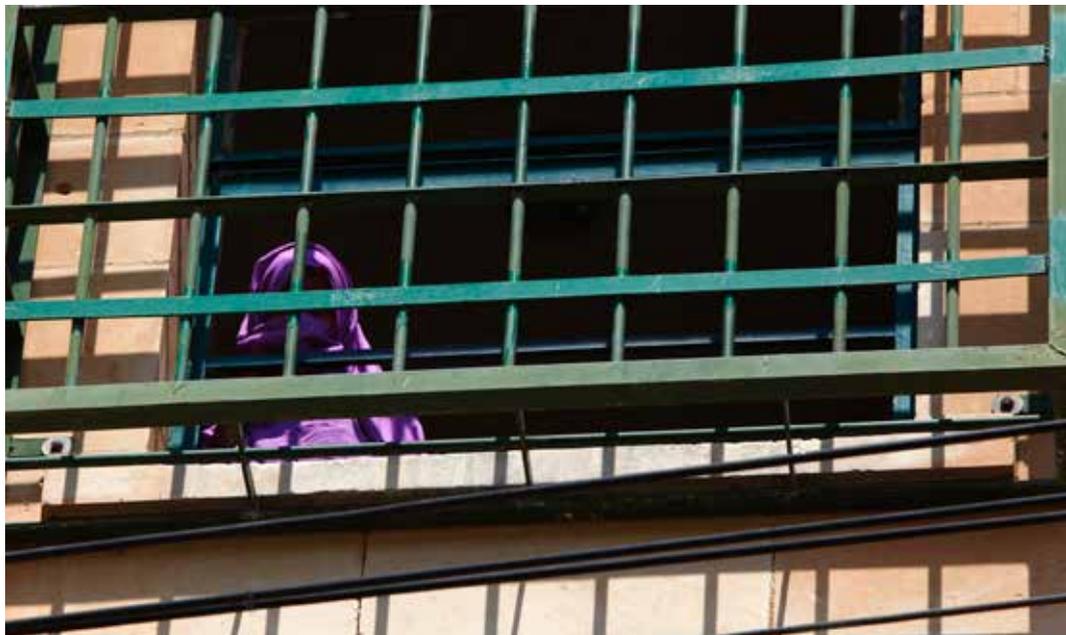
The conditions in detention are not good and we are unhappy about the way we are looked after, especially when we are ill. However, we do want to thank the authorities of Malta, because they have saved our lives and we have a place to eat and sleep. They try their best, they feed us three times a day although they do not give us everything we need.

“ We are like prisoners, isolated people in a cage. We are prisoners, with no freedom at all. ”

No giving up

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When I came here, at first I was happy because I remembered home, I remembered the desert and the sea, and I thought 'at least you are safe now'. Then I saw that people who had arrived long before me were still in detention and I realised something was wrong. Someone came to count us with a torch at night, like we are in prison, and I said this is not normal, it is like prison. Now I am always thinking, I have a constant headache, and I get nightmares. I thought that after all this hardship, my life would be better, but now I know different.



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When I arrived in detention, I was really very shocked; I never thought I would be imprisoned in a country like this. To me, detention is a place where you have no access to your life, you have no control, someone opens the door, someone feeds you food you may not even want. Being here, I think a lot, of the past, of the future, I always fear getting a second rejection. Whenever the guards open the door and I hear the sound of the gate slamming, I get a shock. If I am asleep, that noise wakes me up immediately. I always think ‘is this bad news for me or for someone sleeping near me?’ I always fear something bad.

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I have seen detainees try to kill themselves by hanging themselves or drinking shampoo.

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When we have to go to hospital for treatment, why should we be taken in handcuffs?

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I cannot say what I want because I don't speak the language. If I need to go to hospital I need to bang on the door, I have to use sign language to talk. I am handcuffed to go to Mater Dei and everyone looks at me and I think they are saying, 'are they those immigrants who came to our country?' And I feel really ashamed. First when I came for asylum in this country, they didn't believe me so they make me a liar, then they handcuff me so even if I did nothing, people see me as a criminal – first they see me a liar, then cuffs, so I felt ashamed like I did something wrong.

3. We feel the asylum procedure has failed us

We feel the asylum procedure has failed us because we believe we deserve protection. We think the asylum interview should be tailored to fit each individual case. Most of all, please don't be so quick to decide.

For us, the interview is like a test, an exam that we failed because they asked us questions we felt were unrelated to our case and circumstances and that it was unrealistic to expect us to answer. If only they knew what it was like for us back home, they would never ask such questions. In our village, we had no mobile phones, no internet, no television or anything, but they asked us about towns and villages we never visited and about the political situation! Remember, most of us never even went to school.

We were not well prepared. We did not understand what was expected of us nor did we understand how the whole procedure works. Although we had been provided with some information, we were still confused because we heard so many different things from different people.

Worst of all, we don't understand why we have been rejected when other Somalis who arrived in our same group – some even came from our same village – were granted protection. They were released while we remain stuck here. Why? Is something wrong with us? We were rejected, not the others. So now even those who travelled with us, who are outside, they must be thinking 'what's wrong with you guys?'

Ultimately those who interviewed us do not believe us; they are telling us we are 'liars' and this makes us feel very bad. No one flees her country and risks her life to cross the desert and sea without a good reason. So when we ask for protection, you must realise we are leaving a place of conflict, we cross many countries and face many problems, and we come here with nothing. Please understand: you don't know what it means when you say 'you are

rejected, you have no rights'. Please consider the individual cases and give protection.

Looking back, if we have learned something that will help us now, it is the need to 'paint pictures' when we are talking about our lives and what happened to us. This is what the communications trainer taught us in the JRS sessions: we need to describe the reality we left behind, because people here cannot imagine what it is like, and will never be able to understand unless we make it real for them.

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We think the asylum interview should be tailored to fit each individual case. Most of all, please don't be so quick to decide.

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I said the truth about many things in my interview but I also hid a lot of things from my life – intentionally. I was new and didn't know that what happened to me could make a difference to my future. When I arrived, I meant to say everything but people inside [in detention] told me not say certain things because I would get a “reject”. There was a lot of fear around me and I was terrified. The interpreter was a Somali man and I was not brave enough to tell him everything.

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When they refused my claim, I felt they did not check my story properly. I felt like I was not being treated like a human being because they took a quick decision and the consequence is that I am still here. It is inhuman to detain someone for 18 months just because they did not get protection.

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I am human, I can make mistakes, they ask me 100 questions, I make a few mistakes. Did they reject me for those mistakes? They should look at my problem. Sometimes they say ‘you look tense’, yes, it is the first interview I have ever done, my whole future is at stake, so of course I am afraid and tense.

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My mind is constantly thinking: why didn't you tell your story in another way? I feel guilty about this. Somehow, it is because of how they asked the questions. These were not relevant to my case, they kept asking me about the region, although I said I don't read and write. I felt there was something missing.



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In Somalia, rape is a danger constantly facing women so we don't go out much. I certainly never went far from our farm. Every time I went out, I asked myself: will I come back safely or will someone rape me? And yet they ask me about some place far away from where I live, if I know it exists or not, or whatever.

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4. Life in a container is very hard

Living our life in a container in the open centre is very hard. As human beings, we deserve to have more dignified and better living conditions. When we were in detention, we thought life would be better outside. But after we got our freedom, we discovered that life in detention and outside is the same except that now we have freedom of movement. We are very disappointed.

The open centre is far from everywhere. The containers can be overcrowded. They are very hot in summer and very cold in winter. When it rains, our container leaks sometimes. Single women and men and families live in the same compound. There are five toilets and five showers – but some are not in working order – with small partitions. They are dirty all the time, used by so many people, and they are cleaned only twice a week.

Each of us has 97 euro per month. This is not enough to survive. We don't even have any money to get the bus to go for English lessons.

“ All our life is inside the container: we cook, wash our clothes, sleep, everything inside. ”



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We have a security problem in Hal-Far. What we mean by this is that the place is not safe. We mean that some nights, we see men come in our rooms. Once we screamed and the man ran away. Another time we threw a container for food at the intruder. Last thing at night, we always check our room to see that there are no men. It is very easy to go in and out, there are sliding windows.

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The toilets are far from our container. At night, if we want to go to the toilet, we usually wake up someone to come too so we will not go alone. We go four or five together because we are afraid.

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Eight, five or six people in the same container and we are asking the administration not to bring more people because we are full up.





5. We urgently need a document

We urgently need to have a document. Since our asylum applications have been rejected so far, we don't have any documents. We need protection, to get some basic rights and to be able to get on with our lives.

Without a document, we are stuck in the open centres and we cannot make any plans: right now, our future is zero. We have nothing, we cannot do anything, we cannot go anywhere. A document giving us protection is the key we need to start again, everything else comes with this. What does protection mean for us? Protection means safety, not being sent back to our country. It means shelter. But protection also means belonging to a community where we can give and take, where we can belong again.

Still we face the pain that there are other Somalis who were literally in the same boat as us but whose life is better, because they have protection, and we don't. They have more rights, they live in the community, they get more support, some are working. They say of us, 'this group is rejected, they were in detention for a long time'. They forgot our names, we are called the 'rejected ones'.

“ If I got protection, I would encourage people who are rejected not to give up, but to have hope of a better future. ”

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I will give you a document and you will know how to improve your life by yourself. Or I will give you food, drink and clothes. This is the difference between those who have protection and those who don't.



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How we have benefited from this project

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When others come to visit us in our container, we welcome them. They say ‘you live here, you are rejected, you were in detention for a long time, but you are shining, you look like you are well inside. If I was like you I would kill myself, but you are better than us!’ It is true. We have been rejected and have no documents, we live in Hal-Far. But most of the time we make ourselves happy, because if we think all the time about how we have nothing, we will go mad. And sometimes you can see not only with your eyes, you can see things with your heart. One of the reasons we are always happy and well is because we hope. And we hope because we have the support of people who help and encourage us, who ask us about our stories, about what we need and what we plan. We feel empowered and encouraged. This project has helped us morally, mentally and psychologically. If we did not get this support, we would hide everything in our hearts and we would say nothing at all.

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“ How you [JRS] say things affects us and makes us think that at least we can do something to achieve change. This is what I felt JRS told us: ‘Your voice can reach all around the world. If you feel shy and hide your feelings, your voice will not reach anywhere, but when you explain what you feel in detail, it will.”

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“ Sometimes you can see not only with your eyes, you can see things with your heart. One of the reasons we are always happy and well is because we hope. And we hope because we have the support of people who help and encourage us. ”





📷 Laki, one of the women who contributed to the booklet, meets Daniela Schadt, the partner of German President Joachim Gauck at the JRS office on 30 April 2015.
(DOI - Clodagh Farrugia O'Neill)

No giving up

An unfinished journey

What strikes us as we accompany the women on their taxing journey is their insight about what protection is or rather what protection should be. When we discussed human rights, they mentioned the right to belong to a community as a priority. When they were spelling out what protection means for them, they underlined not only safety and shelter, but once again the possibility of belonging to a community where they can give and take. For them, this is what life is about, as it is after all for us, and they make a clear appeal to our solidarity.

Getting a precious document is the alpha and omega of their quest. This poignant longing is felt by asylum seekers in other places too. The document acquires a quasi-mythical status. The mantra is: 'once I have my document, I'll be okay!' And yet this desperate hope does not always translate into reality, as refugees realise soon after getting their longed-for document. This is simply because having a document that grants protection does NOT automatically guarantee everything they need to start over. It's obvious when you think about it. Protection is not just a piece of paper, it is about creating communities that enable people - whoever they are and wherever they come from - to LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL, to have all the support they need to live in dignity and self-sufficiency, to develop their potential, to be with and to be able to look after their families, to be part of the community where they live.

The women who lent their voices to this booklet and who generously shared their stories with us do not have their document as yet, nor do they have the life they want so badly... a life where they can belong. Their journey is not over yet. Meanwhile, they have created their own community, they stick together, look out for each other, and they remain incredibly strong and hopeful.

Together with them, we hope they will reach journey's end. And we take off our hats to them because, however much they say we have taught them, we have learned more from their resilience, generosity and humour. So what can we say but thank you!

JRS Malta

I still hope
I will get protection



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