

SEEKING SANCTUARY IN THE UK

By a Kurdish Syrian woman

Asylum seekers and refugees often face tremendous challenges and difficult circumstances as they navigate a new country and seek safety and security. For me as a Syrian Kurdish woman living in the United Kingdom, the asylum process has been continuously traumatic and stressed.

During 13 years of war in Syria, I faced bombs, rockets, and chemical weapons. I experienced the deaths of friends, family members, and worst of all, my own mother, who was blown up by a bomb that ISIS had planted in her dressing gown. After years of infertility that doctors attributed to war-related stress, I gave birth to my son days after my mother was killed. Eventually, I fled to the UK seeking refuge and a better life for my kids.

However, the struggle did not end there. The asylum process prolonged the trauma I had experienced in Syria. Despite being an ambitious pharmacist who cares deeply about her children and their mental health, I felt hopeless in trying to help my five-year-old son, who experiences anxiety and distress when the family moves from one temporary living situation to another. Despite numerous complaints, my family does not have satisfactory accommodation – a temporary home that provides security, safety, a reasonable diet, and enough space for active boys to jump and play. I can say that children's lives in the hotels provided for asylum seekers are like the lives of battery chickens trapped in cages. They are expected to keep silent and walk in straight lines through the corridors. Running is not allowed. We have often been scolded because our children do not meet standards that are designed for adults.

The furniture has very sharp edges, leading to accidents and injuries. I can't forget that freezing snowy night in December when my 3 year-old son pushed his brother against a cupboard. My husband took him to A & E, where they spent their night waiting for glue to be applied to his bleeding head. They walked back to the hotel at 4 am as we did not have money to pay for a taxi. None of us, including my son, will forget that horrible night. We felt very sad and hopeless.

After 2 months, my younger son had a similar accident. He had a deep, open cut on his head that narrowly missed his eye. Again my husband went to A & E and the paediatric surgeon asked him to bring the child back the next day to have surgery under general anesthetic. Fortunately, my son recovered quickly, but the sense of danger is always with us.

I was very sad and decided to shout and tell Migrant Help that we were struggling in this room, 2 by 3 meters, stuffed with 3 beds and some very sharp edges on the bedside tables. I am still stunned by the response I got. I was told that it's normal for kids to get injured, and the woman on the phone remembered that her little brother was injured when he was running around in their garden. Her advice: be patient.

When I think about my kids' physical safety – one of them might have lost an eye – mental health sometimes seems like a bit of a luxury. Of course, it is not.

My whole family is traumatized by what we have been going through. When I arrived at the hotel and realised that the process would be so prolonged, I started bleeding, and this lasted for 3 months. I let my GP refer me for mental health support, but the queue was very long and several months later I'm still waiting.

The staff at the hotel used to enter our room without knocking on the door, and if we were out, they would open our bags and mess around with our things. I complained about that, but they didn't respond, until one day the Cotton Tree Trust stepped in. They stood by us in every possible way and gave us hope that our lives would improve. They complained to the hotel about the staff's intrusive behaviour, and this doesn't happen any more.

My kids don't like the food we are given. It's often too spicy and it's usually fried, with very few vegetables, reheated in plastic containers in the microwave. Perhaps this is unusual, but my kids like healthy food, and they enjoyed the food I used to cook for them. Food has become an issue in our relationship. It's hard for them to understand that I can no longer cook for them, and they resent me for this. This is very painful for me, and I feel so helpless, as of course I'd like them to have healthy food.

I take my 3 year-old son to children's centers for long hours daily, as he does not have space to play in the room and he is very sociable and needs children to play with. I tried to get a nursery place for him from his 3rd birthday, but our expectations were repeatedly dashed. We were promised a place and then turned away when we arrived at the agreed time. This was hugely frustrating for my son, and very painful for my husband and myself.

From 9pm every night, when the children sleep, I devote all my energy to finding a scholarship so that I can take up one of the university places I have been offered. My husband (a doctor) and I (a pharmaceutical scientist) are desperate to convert our Syrian certificates so that we can work in the UK. We worked hard and achieved high grades before we came to the UK, and it is endlessly frustrating to witness the NHS and cost of living crisis without being able to make a contribution. We were always proud of our independence, and we want to recover this as soon as possible. Like any caring parent, we want to do the best for our children.

I swear that every single detail of our story has left a deep wound in our minds that has turned into a permanent scar. We are from Syria and until recently, Syrians escaping from the war could join a resettlement scheme in the UK. Attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees have hardened since then. Not only are we told to "be patient"; our family's health, mental and physical, is at risk. It is one thing to ask adults to wait; my husband and I are happy to do this. It is another to expect patience from very young children.

My story highlights the difficulties that asylum seekers and refugees face in trying to build new lives and heal from the traumas of their past. Mental health support and safe living conditions

are essential for these individuals to be able to recover and thrive in their new homes. However all too often, these resources are not readily available or accessible, leaving individuals and families feeling isolated and unsupported. It is important for governments and communities to recognize and address the unique challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers and provide them with the resources and support they need to rebuild their lives.

It is also essential for individuals to speak out and share their stories, as this raises awareness and promotes change. The legal words 'asylum seeker' only tell part of the story. Yes, we are seeking leave to remain, known as asylum, but it has been suggested that asylum seekers who have been forced to flee from their countries might be better described as sanctuary seekers. I agree with this. Sanctuary, meaning protection from persecution or a serious risk to life, is what we want and need.

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