



“I found myself pregnant and alone with nothing but £4 and a bottle of water”

This is all Amma\*, a 29-year-old from Malawi, had when she claimed asylum in 2021. Two years on, she’s still waiting to find out her fate. With a Home Office backlog keeping thousands in limbo and fresh threats of deportation hanging over their heads, Meena Alexander seeks the real stories behind the headlines

PHOTOGRAPHY: NATO WELTON

**A**mma isn't her real name, but everything else she tells me over the phone from the cramped Birmingham hotel room she shares with her son is painfully real. A story of violence, abandonment and the painstaking process to prove she's worthy of protection, punctuated by tears and extended silences as she struggles to gather her words. A story she tells with fear in her voice that at any moment, her right to sanctuary will be refused and she'll be catapulted back into danger.

If you take the government at its word, people like Amma are simply trying their luck. Risking life-threatening crossings in crowded dinghies; hanging under moving lorries; spending months in makeshift tents or simply catching a flight that sees their entire life become a speck in the distance, all to 'take advantage' of the UK's immigration system. A system that can take years, where appeals cost thousands of pounds and require the help of social workers and solicitors, and which under new proposals may never grant them peace of mind.

The 'Stop The Boats' bill announced by Rishi Sunak last month sees the government take a hard line on what they call "illegal" immigrants. Plastered in red across the podium from which he gave his first big speech of the year, the prime minister's catchy new slogan takes aim at the record number of desperate people crossing the channel last year: 45,756, the majority of whom were fleeing the war-torn countries of Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria, Iran and Sudan. The bill, if passed, means no matter who or what you're running from, the moment you set foot on British soil without prior consent you will be taken to a detention centre and deported as soon as possible. You'll also be permanently barred from re-entering the UK. In short, you'll be treated like a criminal for not getting down to the paperwork before trying to save your life.

Genevieve Caston, head of UK programmes at the International Rescue Committee, feels it shows a worrying lack of humanity. "Three-quarters of people arriving by small boat end up being recognised as refugees. They come this way because there is no way to claim asylum in the UK from outside the country, and almost no safe routes to get here," she says. "They are overwhelmingly fleeing conflict or persecution, but the rhetoric in our politics and media suggests they are doing something wrong."

As home secretary in 2021, Priti Patel told parliament that "70% of individuals on small boats are single men who are effectively economic migrants" – an assertion that last week *The Observer* revealed was based on nothing. But the government continues to dig in its heels and frame this as a crackdown on chancers and criminals. When I put it to the Home Office that new policies seemed to attack the most vulnerable, a spokesperson said: "Those in need of protection should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach rather than risking their lives or paying people smugglers to make the dangerous journey across the Channel. It is vital that we do not incentivise people-smuggling gangs to target certain people, including women, which is why

the Illegal Migration Bill will change the law so that people coming to the UK illegally can be detained and swiftly removed to their home country or a safe third country."

It's the most draconian immigration policy in modern history, and the world has responded accordingly. The UN Refugee Agency says it is "profoundly concerned" that the bill effectively amounts to a ban. The Archbishop of York called it "cruelty without purpose". Human rights organisation Liberty warned that it deliberately breaches international and domestic law,

## "THE FEAR IS WORSE THAN EVER"

"removing basic human rights from refugees, migrants and victims of slavery and human trafficking". Even Gary Lineker was moved to condemn it, comparing descriptions of asylum seekers to the language of 1930s Germany. "We take far fewer refugees than other major European countries," he tweeted.

It is starting to feel like the bad old days before the Brexit referendum, when words like "swarm" appeared on front pages and Nigel Farage grinned by his billboard of brown faces with the tagline "Breaking Point". It was a scapegoating success that Conservatives are no doubt hoping to replicate. When there's mess all around, point the finger – preferably at people without a voice or the power to vote.

This is why, when my editor and I discussed how to cover this news, our initial plan was to

amplify the voices of women who know what it's like to be a refugee in this country. The political debate felt inhumane, talk of an "invasion" and "crackdown" without any acknowledgment that these words affect real people. We wanted to give this space directly to them.

But as I reached out to organisations that work with refugees, I was met with a hesitancy I hadn't seen before. Even humanitarian powerhouses like the British Red Cross expressed concern about the sensitivity of such stories right now. Others said, understandably, they weren't willing to ask refugees to relive their trauma or expose them to more abuse.

"Whether you look at the recently announced bill, the Rwanda deportation scheme or general anti-migrant rhetoric, it's hard not to be affected by the lack of compassion and empathy for those fleeing persecution and conflict around the world," explains Caston. "Refugees and asylum seekers across the UK are feeling uncertain. Some are anxious about friends and family who remain in their country of origin without a pathway to safety, while others worry that their own rights as refugees in the UK may be threatened." One volunteer mentioned February's violent protest in Merseyside, the latest in a string of far-right attacks. Demonstrators threw stones and fireworks at a hotel housing asylum seekers. Some of the people inside had recently escaped war zones.

### STUCK IN LIMBO

"The fear is worse than ever," says Comfort Etim, director of Refugee Women Connect, a charity that provides drop-in centres and safe spaces for asylum seekers, refugees, trafficked women and domestic violence survivors. "Take the

NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED. PHOTO POSED BY MODEL. PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES WITH KIND PERMISSION OF THE ROYAL MINT

# This is Amma's story

*Living a happy life in Malawi, Amma\* never expected to end up on the streets of Birmingham pregnant, destitute and alone. This is one woman's experience of seeking asylum 5,000 miles from home*

"I find that sharing my story helps me heal, but it doesn't get any easier to believe. In Malawi, life was good. I lived with my mum, working and studying climate change, going to the gym and playing netball. Then I was introduced to a British-Malawian man by a family friend. I fell for him fast, and we were in a long-distance relationship for three years. He would visit often – he was from a powerful family close to the Malawian government. I believed everything he told me about his life in the UK; I was blinded by love, and soon I was pregnant with his baby.

I was offered the chance to fly to the UK to attend a conference, so at five months pregnant I headed over for a two-week trip with plans to meet my partner for a few days before I returned home. The moment he picked me up, he felt like a stranger. We tried to catch up in the car but his phone kept ringing and he seemed uncomfortable answering it in front of me. I started to



suspect I didn't know him as well as I thought, but when I confronted him he became furious. He drove us to an empty park, locked the doors and beat me. It was one of the lowest moments of my life; I was sure I was going to die.

When he finally stopped all I could think about was getting home to my mum. I felt sick because of the baby and told him I needed water, so he agreed to drive me to a shop. I went in with the £5 I had in my pocket; when I came out, he had disappeared. My phone, passport and luggage were in his car. I stood in the street and cried.

This is how I found myself lost and alone in the UK. I found shelter with an acquaintance of

announcement of the Rwanda scheme," she says, referring to the Home Office's plan to deport 'illegal' migrants to Rwanda, which has already been halted by the European Court of Human Rights. "Every single woman we work with, including the ones who have been granted leave to remain, totally panicked. Mentally, it was really disturbing for them. More than one woman said they were worried about going to sleep at night in case they got a knock at the door."

The few women who did want to talk about their ongoing asylum claims were visibly and audibly shaken. One, a 22-year-old displaced by civil war in Sudan and separated from her six siblings at the age of 16, spoke of the year she'd been waiting in limbo to find out if she would be able to stay in the UK and start a new life – she dreams of training to become a nurse. "You're not allowed to work, you don't have much money, and you live in one room waiting and waiting to hear from the Home Office. But all the time I'm telling myself I should be grateful," she adds, cutting herself off. "At least I'm not hiding or being hurt any more."

I also hear from an Afghan woman who feels there are unfriendly eyes on her when she ventures out of her temporary accommodation. She's one of millions displaced since the US withdrew troops and the Taliban regime took control of Afghanistan in 2021 – but not one of the meagre 22 refugees who came via

the official Afghan citizens resettlement scheme last year. "Sometimes someone asks where I'm from and they don't seem to believe my story. I hear what they say about migrants and it's not always good," she says. "I am glad I made it, and I've met kind people, but I worry that I'm not wanted here. I wonder what will happen to me."

Etim, who spent seven years in the asylum system before she was granted humanitarian protection, understands instinctively what the women she works with are feeling right now. The number of unprocessed asylum cases in the UK is at a record high of 166,261 – a rise of 408% since 2017. In real-world terms this means thousands of people put up in poor quality temporary accommodation, unable to work and forced to survive on £45 a week.

"It's a time of distress," says Etim. "You have no idea whether your case will be accepted or refused, so your life is on pause." She says some of the women she supports have been waiting two years for their interview with the Home Office. "Even when their interviews finally do come around, they're not offered mental health



support after hours of being interrogated about what they've been through – rape, violence, trauma. That's why charities like us step in and do what we can. It's enough to break anybody."

The question of where to house the growing numbers of people stuck in this limbo has also been in the headlines, with deputy prime minister Dominic Raab announcing proposals to put asylum seekers on barges, disused cruise ships and in military bases. Alex Fraser, the British Red Cross's UK director for refugee support and restoring family links, is among the many experts voicing concern. "People who have been forced to flee their homes have already experienced unimaginable trauma," he says. "They need stability, support and to feel safe. Military sites, by their very nature, can re-traumatise people who have fled war."

Last month, Raab told the public that "plush" hotel rooms acted as an "incentive" for small boats crossings and claimed that many asylum seekers were "effectively abusing the system". It's rhetoric like this that incenses campaigners like Etim, who see the reality of the conditions people are living in. "If you saw the properties asylum seekers are moved into, so often they are the worst of the worst – the ones council tenants refuse to put up with," she says. "I know

a lady who has a child with sickle cell anaemia, and their house is like a swamp it's so full of vermin. Another woman with lung cancer is living surrounded by damp. From where I am standing, no one is milking it."

You'd be forgiven for feeling this discomfort is designed as punishment. The underlying message is this: that people arriving in this country to claim asylum are devious rather than desperate, and we must deter them at all costs.

I find it a ridiculously hypocritical approach. Granted, there will be some refugees who aren't fleeing from a traumatising or life-threatening situation, perhaps just a soul-destroying one. Poverty and limited prospects for themselves and their children – isn't that something anyone would try to escape? That's without even getting into the complex ways Britain has influenced the climate, economy and political instability of many countries that people are now leaving in droves.

### WHO DESERVES SAFETY?

The narrative of the 'good' versus 'bad' refugee is hard to ignore when you consider the way we welcomed Ukrainians fleeing Russia's invasion – 224,000 were granted access to the UK with special fast-track visas, and rightfully so. But plenty have been quick to point out the lack of grace extended to those affected by other world conflicts. For Etim, it all comes down to the stories we're sold. "The media showed us what was happening in Ukraine through an empathetic lens and we were able to feel their pain," she says. "But just because we're not seeing the same coverage of awful events in other countries doesn't mean they're not happening."

A YouGov study showed that British opinion of Ukrainian refugees was warmer than of those coming from Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. More than 70% supported resettling the former, whereas support for the other countries fell to 40-50%. It's an uncomfortable truth that suggests the problem we have with migrants is less about a strain on resources and more about who we see as worthy of sharing them with.

People like Etim, once a woman fleeing persecution and now a pillar of strength for others like her, are trying to turn this tide. Fighting an uphill battle against the hostile policies and political leaders who demonise the vulnerable, determined to highlight the humanity of every person who makes that journey. "I want people to know that being a refugee is not a choice that we've made. We had no choice," she says. "We miss our families and our homes, but we're here now and we're just trying to survive."

She leaves me with her favourite quote from a poem by fellow migrant Warsan Shire. "You have to understand, no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land."

**If you'd like to support asylum seekers and refugees, consider donating to a humanitarian organisation such as the International Rescue Committee or British Red Cross, or volunteering with local support groups like Women For Refugee Women and Refugee Women Connect. If you disagree with the government's asylum policies, make your opinions known by writing to your MP: find their contact details at writetothem.com**