



An **A** to **Z** of Poverty

by survivors from Write to Life at Freedom from Torture

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An exploration of the many ways poverty affects clients of Freedom from Torture. Personal testimony from members of the Write to Life group and other clients is supported by excerpts from the '[The Poverty Barrier: The Right to Rehabilitation for Survivors of Torture in the UK](#)'



Since 1985 Freedom from Torture has been the only UK-based human rights organisation dedicated to the treatment and rehabilitation of torture survivors. We offer services throughout England and Scotland to more than 1,000 torture survivors a year, which include psychological and physical therapies, forensic documentation of torture, legal and welfare advice, and creative projects like Write to Life. We use the evidence of the torture survivors we support to hold torturing states accountable internationally, and to work towards a world free from torture.

Introduction

by Sheila Hayman, Coordinator, Write to Life

“We have all had different experiences but for me the worst, worst, worst thing I have come across is to be an asylum seeker in this country” (Souvenirs, 2013)

This is a shocking thing to hear from a survivor of torture and former child soldier, but the words, spoken by a Write to Life member in our play ‘Souvenirs’, have been echoed by many other Freedom from Torture clients.

All kinds of hardship beset our clients and other asylum seekers, often including years of limbo when they get up every single day not knowing if today they will be allowed to stay, or be sent back to the people who tortured them. But an equal or even greater burden is the constant struggle just to stay afloat on the tiny sums of money disbursed to them by the UK government.

Some refused asylum seekers—and the vast majority of asylum claims are refused the first time—receive no support at all. Others are given £36.95 to live on each week. That has to cover everything apart from the roof over their head: food, clothes, stamps, soap, and travel. They don’t get an Oyster card or phone money—even though they need both of these to process their claim and to arrange and attend the many appointments involved. Attending college, or even seeing friends, are often impossible dreams.

Some refused asylum seekers are not given any cash at all; instead, they have to use a card, only valid at certain supermarkets, which may be far from where they live.

A couple of years ago, Freedom from Torture’s Research department decided it was time to make a systematic examination of the consequences of this poverty for our clients and others in a similar situation. The resulting report, ‘The Poverty Barrier: The Right to Rehabilitation for survivors of torture in the UK’, published in July 2013, makes for sombre reading. It seems almost incredible that these consequences can be intended by a humane government: our government.



The report includes many personal testimonies from clients, including members of Write to Life. Many of them had feelings that went beyond the simple facts of their situation, and they wanted to express them more strongly. So one of my colleagues thought of compiling an 'A-Z' of the results of this poverty. The resulting work was recorded as podcasts and uploaded to the Freedom from Torture website.

Write to Life started as a creative writing group, a safe and supported space of self-expression for our clients. As Freedom from Torture enters its 30th anniversary year, it has become much more than this. It is an active performance group whose members take their work to venues around the country and collaborate with major arts institutions in diverse ways.

When we were considering our next big project and asking about their concerns, this enforced poverty and the many hardships it brings were clearly matters they all felt deeply. So it seemed natural to build on the vital work of our colleagues by turning the 'A-Z' into a performance piece, and publishing alongside it both the final, powerful writings about their personal experiences and some of the shocking evidence of the general and widespread truths beyond.

The result represents the first collaboration between the Clinical and Research departments of Freedom from Torture and Write to Life. We in Write to Life are grateful for their help, and proud of the results and of the creativity and resilience of our writers.

We hope, as you read what follows, that you will be too.

Sheila Hayman, April 2015

A is for AKAMWANYI

by Uganda

Akamwanyi is a noun. It refers to a coffee seed or a small subsidy. Emwanyi, another noun, means coffee plantation.

Rehabilitation is a bendy road that one has to walk through to be able to restore, maintain, improve and regain what was lost in the past. Through this journey you need all the help you can get. Trying to leave the past behind and looking forward to the future doesn't happen overnight. Most of the time one is tired, damaged and hopeless.

Akamwanyi is a Lugandan word from the kingdom of Buganda. The word means 'a small coffee bean', and it's used as a sign of friendship. The sharing of coffee beans, especially during marriage ceremonies, speaks volumes.

Akamwanyi is one bean. A token. But to make a cup of coffee you need many beans: you need Emwanyi.

Think of a group of people in a neighbour's house, with the neighbour next to the coffee machine. You have no access to the coffee machine, because you are not in your own home. Even if he is fully aware of your situation, he can choose to give you a cup of coffee—or just one bean.

All the way through the asylum system, one has to depend on these single coffee beans, until the permission to plant your own garden is given. You have no choice but to wait, and wait.

On the other hand, those who have the right to work, by birth or through other means, can go out and plant their own garden where they can grow their own Emwanyi.

The system renders you powerless. Even if you have the skills of a gardener you are not allowed to exercise them.

I dream of the right to get beyond surviving on benefits, go out to find a job and build an Emwanyi garden of my own.



Akamwanyi » **helplessness, impotence to work, dependence on charity**

Those who are seeking asylum in the UK are not permitted to work while their application is being considered, except in certain very limited circumstances.

Most clients who participated in the research said that having access to paid work is the key to being self-reliant, having self respect and to avoiding poverty. Many described significant frustration and distress at not having permission to work and not being able to support themselves from the time they arrived in the UK.

Many described having been productive, active members of society in their country of origin, supporting themselves and their families, or having been students with hopes of a productive working life ahead of them. Many respondents had been self-employed, owning a variety of shops and small businesses. Others had been employed, for example as a teacher, university lecturer, nurse, engineer, journalist, film maker, electrician, financial advisor, technician, marketing executive, priest, police officer and secretary.

“I am desperate to work. I feel as though all the knowledge I have is disappearing and my mind is deteriorating.”

“There is one animal that I envy so much in this country and it’s the pet dog. When I see people with pet dogs and see how they are taken care of in homes, fed and everything, I compare myself with them and cannot measure up. I lose hope in living. I envy the dog.”



B is for BIG BOOTS

by Dorkus

Big Boots is a noun. Big Boots means police or immigration officer.

As an asylum applicant or refugee, it feels like there are Big Boots everywhere in the UK—in the reporting centre, the police station, in the detention centre, in the court, on public transport, in the street. Sometime they enter your house. They are everywhere.

We call them Big Boots because they have big power and we can hear their step coming...BOOM...BOOM...BOOM.

Because of my previous experience of Big Boots back in my home country, I see them and I am scared, I want to run.

In my own country, they came to my door and took me so now, whenever I see anyone in uniform I think they are here for me.

I want to trust Big Boots here, really I do.

But while they torture people physically back home, they torture us mentally here...Big Boots.

Big Boots » **fear of uniformed officers**

Client participants provided evidence of the many ways in which torture has impacted on them psychologically, affecting their functioning and their ability to manage their difficult circumstances. They described suffering traumatic flashbacks and nightmares which make it difficult to sleep, concentrate or forget past trauma, regular panic attacks as well as feeling constantly anxious, fearful and unsafe. They also described feeling highly sensitive, irritable, unduly affected by events and circumstances, and as though their mind is unstable.

Many respondents stated that torture had fundamentally altered them as a person, changing their world view and making it difficult for them to trust other people. They described feeling as though the environment and other people are hostile and that others are constantly critical and judgmental of them.

C is for CROYDON

by Buba

Croydon is a noun.

To you, Croydon is a place—with shops, with people, with trams. But for me and most asylum applicants, it is different. Just hearing the word 'Croydon' takes you straight back to your asylum interview, whether you want to think about it or not. It is not a geographic space for me. It is an emotional place. I had been the UK for several months before I called the Home Office. I had not contacted them before because I was scared, but I did not want to hide any more. That was the first time I heard the word "Croydon". I knew nothing of the interview process before I went there. I sat for hours before they called my name and I came to the counter.

Because of my experience of torture I felt a panic having to answer questions to this man in uniform. His manner did not help. He was aggressive. He gave the impression he disliked me even before he gave the impression he did not believe me. There in that moment, I lost all hope. I thought I was going to be deported. It was an immense sense of panic.

These Asylum Screening Unit staff need training how to relate to survivors of torture. It is matter of respect and dignity. It would be nice to hear 'Croydon' and think something positive.

Croydon » reporting centre, horrible place

"In order to save money for my appointments I was forced to feed from market leftovers or unwanted goods."

Respondents also described making difficult decisions on a daily basis—such as choosing between paying for a travel card to meet a therapist, attend a hospital appointment or meet with their lawyer, having anything to eat that day, or buying an item of essential clothing.

"Many times I have gone without food to have the money to 'report' to UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) or to see my lawyer, or to go to church."

Clients reported feeling intense anxiety that the difficulties in communication would cause unnecessary delays in their asylum claim being decided, and that missed appointments with the UK Visas & Immigration (UKVI) would impact negatively on the outcome of their claim.

D is for DAMP

by Aso

Damp is a noun, an adjective, and a state of being

D is for Damp is noun, a verb, a state of mind. I am an asylum seeker. I come from dry land which has a long hot summer, where most of the time the sun is lying in the middle of the sky and burns the earth. I come from a hot land where everything is warm and dry. The air, relationships, hot blood you are but cold freedom. I am asylum seeker; I come from a dry land to here, a damp house and a wet climate, where most of the time the sun sleeps and hides itself in the clouds and the air is always wet. There are frequent showers, damp room, cold relationships, misty features and a lonely wait, but not freedom. There is not much differences outside and inside of my life. Outside is freezing, there is no body to talk to, everyone is in a hurry with his or her life. Inside the house, I stare at damp walls. The air is as cold as my loneliness. The damp hurt my bones, my back and I am always in pain.

Inside of me a war and a bitter past; the images of my friends and family when I left them. Dark memories of personal pain and suffering. I am an asylum seeker, all my life is damp, past and present, physically and mentally.

It's damp inside my brain, as it's damp inside my room, therefore I am unenthusiastic about everything: my solicitor, translator, landlord, my neighbours who never like me, my immigration officer, even the postman who never brings me sunshine. But one thing I have heard is that when you get 'leave to remain', the damp starts to leave your walls.

E is for EXILE

by Botofe

Exile is a verb. It means to feel completely separate from the other people around you. It is a state of mind but you feel it in your whole body.

I get exile when I can't communicate.

When I first came to the UK it was really bad. I was 19. I was lost. I couldn't understand any of the signs or what people advised me to do.

I didn't know where to go or how to ask for help.

It was suffocating.

I will never forget the day I went to Lunar House and they turned me away. I was desperate for help but nobody understood my language.

Then, like a miracle, I met a woman who spoke French. It was like I could breathe again. Her connection brought me back to life.

Now I go to English classes every day. The weight of exile is easier now. But when it comes, I still feel it.

More needs to be done to help asylum applicants and refugees integrate in this country.

Exile » homesickness

Social exclusion is a particularly significant aspect of the poverty experienced by survivors of torture in the UK. Symptoms of depressive disorders and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), both of which are common among torture survivors, include 'diminished interest in significant activities' and 'detachment or estrangement from others'. Such trauma-related symptoms may be compounded by living in a foreign country separated from family and community, being part of a stigmatised group as an asylum seeker or refugee and living with very limited income, no income or no means of earning one. The consequences of this aspect of poverty may be particularly damaging and long-lasting for survivors of torture.

"I feel lonely, isolated, alienated. I even sometimes forget how to speak, unable to use, remember words, unable to put words together."

More than 80% of respondents overall also said that they were **never** or **not often** able to celebrate special occasions with others, such as birthdays, anniversaries or festivals.

Maintaining friendships and participating in social and community life were severely restricted by the cost of travel, the costs of telephone calls to make and keep contact and to make arrangements, the costs of being able to provide hospitality and reciprocate socially, the cost of appropriate clothing and footwear to attend events in public and in the community, and the cost of entrance and membership fees and other charges.

"When I look at myself my face is there, my physical body is there but I am not there, I am out of myself."

F is for FEJA-FEJA

By Tracy

Feja-feja is a noun. It's a gambling game from my country but also a word we use to describe life in the UK.

Feja-feja is usually played by people who can't afford casinos, in the road or in backyards. They can't even afford a whole pack of cards, so they probably play with four or five. They play in groups of two to four people, with no proper rules—they just make them up. But nobody wants to listen to each other, so there's a lot of arguing.

There were three of us in my first feja-feja game: the immigration officer, the Home Office, and myself.

In 2000, I came to the UK. I arrived at Heathrow airport, trying to save my life. My face was disfigured by scars, and deformed by injury; I could barely open my mouth to speak. But the UK immigration officer did not give me a chance to explain what had driven me here. I was returned to South Africa.

It was a feja-feja for me to come to the UK again. This time, there were four of us in the game; they brought in an interpreter, even though I didn't ask for one. He stacked the odds against me by changing everything I said. I got quite upset about it. So in this game there was a lot of arguing, as usual.

The interpreter got thrown out of the game, and after that, things got better. I could speak for myself. I had taken a chance, it was a win or lose situation. This was feja-feja, but the stakes were real. And this time I won.

Feja-Feja » a lottery with the UKVI

Respondents to this research had typically been refused their initial claim for asylum, despite their history of torture, and had submitted further representations for a 'fresh claim' with additional evidence such as an expert medical report documenting the physical and psychological impact of their torture (Medico-Legal Report). Many of Freedom from Torture's clients are in this position, having had their initial asylum claim refused. This may be due to poor decision-making in cases involving torture and/or the poor quality of legal representation, making a fresh claim necessary for protection reasons.



G is for GUESTS

by Jade

Guest is a noun. It refers to a visitor—normally invited, and welcome

I used to stay in a National Asylum Support Service (NASS) accommodation hostel. Every night, as soon as the lights went off, my guests would come out in their thousands; some came by helicopter, others came crawling, some just sat, lazing around. They owned the hostel, so they were untouchable. One day as I was asleep, one crawled into my ear and the sound of its music woke me up. There was dancing in my ears—he could have given Michael Jackson a run for his Moon walk. The others were laughing and chattering as if they had been drinking at All Bar One the whole night.

I could not take it any more so I ran to my friend's room. "There's a guest in my ear!" I shouted. My friend knew what I was talking about because 'guest' is our slang word for a cockroach. She poured water into my ear to try and flush him out, but the guest stayed put! I ran to the housing provider and shouted at the top of my voice: "Help! Help! There is a guest in my ear!" The man looked very confused and probably thought I had lost my marbles.

He asked me, "How can someone get into your flipping ear?" My friends started berating him, telling him that they had repeatedly warned him that there were millions of cockroaches in the hostel, in all our rooms, and that he had done nothing to get rid of them. None of us was going to give him an easy ride.

He swallowed his pride and called an ambulance. Within minutes it arrived and two of my friends went with me to A&E. A nurse asked what was wrong and I told her that there were guests in my right ear. The original dancer seemed to have multiplied, which made me very uneasy.

As I lay on the bed, waiting for these annoying guests to be removed from my ear, I hatched a plan. I would suggest to my friends that we collected these maniac cockroaches and dump them on the housing officer's desk, closing the door behind us so that none could escape. We would see how he reacted then.



Guests » **parasites and infestation at home**

Structural and maintenance problems that had occurred over the preceding year included pest infestation—such as mice, cockroaches and bedbugs, lack of heating or hot water due to system breakdown, windows and external doors that could not be locked, broken windows or glass and absence of smoke or fire alarms.

“I complained for six months about a hole in the floor; the owner only just fixed it now. For one month a broken window has been just covered in cardboard, with glass on the floor outside. They have not sent anyone and it is a bedroom and it is very cold. The washing machine leaks. There are cockroaches and mice.”



H is for HARD REST

by Anonymous

Hard Rest is a noun.

After my asylum application was rejected, I didn't have any support. Nothing. I had no financial support, I had no place to sleep, I had no security, I had nothing. Really nothing. It was then that I learnt what a 'Hard Rest' is.

A 'Hard Rest' is a place I find to rest my head. But it is very different from an 'Easy Rest'—don't get the two confused. An 'Easy Rest' is when you have your own home—when you go to bed in warmth and comfort. Everything is clean.

A 'Hard Rest' is sleeping rough. When you have to sleep in the cold, or through storms, or in the snow, or in the park, where you have to compete with the foxes. I have had lots of 'Hard Rests'. Too many.

I used to sleep in the old buildings in Elephant and Castle. It was dirty and there were lots of mice and rats.

Sometimes I would have 'Hard Rests' on the night-buses. I would sit upstairs, at the back of the bus, while the bus went round and round. Drunk people would come up to me sometimes. They would bully me and burn my hand with lighters.

I preferred the foxes. They didn't come looking for a fight, or to bully me. They just wanted shelter from the cold, the same as me.

You come from prison where you have no way to defend or protect yourself. I came here expecting peace and a new mind. But you don't find that peace.

There are two kinds of rest: physical rest and mental rest.

Many people don't understand how difficult it is to cope with the stress of being alone, not having confidence to let your mind go—not feeling safe. I show the world a smile, to protect myself. But inside it's always this pain.

Today, I have a comfortable warm bed for my body, but no bed for my mind. When I think of London, I think of 'Hard Rests'.

Hard Rest » sleeping rough

Of the 26 respondents living with no formal support from the government at the time of the research, seven people said that they had been forced to sleep rough at times. These respondents reported being forced to sleep in train or bus stations, churches, public or abandoned public buildings, in buses and in doorways on the street.

Not having money for a bus fare can stop a survivor even getting to a session with their therapist. If they can attend, there is often so much of a practical nature to discuss—"Where will I sleep tonight? How can I afford to eat this week?"—that little time remains to work through, contain and relieve the appalling traumatic memories and feelings that can constantly beset a survivor of torture.



I is for IMBAHURU

by Hasani

Imbahuru is a noun. When people are talking about the Home Office, whether for reporting or for interview, they call it Imbahuru, which, loosely translated, means Big House.

The word instils fear in people because of the gruelling marathon interviews, and the reporting office where one might be detained.

Nobody would want to say the word 'Home Office' aloud; it's too terrifying. Even the word Imbahuru is usually spoken in hushed tones. Imbahuru is like hell. It's a stressful place and everyone wants to avoid it but they are forced there by circumstances.

Some people who claim asylum after they're already in this country are 'invited' for a series of interviews. They start saying 'ndiri kuenda kuimbahuru': 'I'm going to the Home Office'. And this becomes a regular part of their language.

Its impact is psychological and sometimes physical. Psychological in that the black and white uniforms of the officials always bring back memories of suffering at the hands of the state operatives back home; you can't avoid these encounters. Just waiting for your turn is stressful, because you never know when you'll be told, "Can you please go through that door"—where you might be detained pending deportation.

The physical effects are the painful feet from walking all the way; even when you get there, you find a long queue which you can't jump. Walking alone for a long distance, you feel so lonely. You start thinking, "Why am I going through this experience?" So by the time you get home you're exhausted and depressed.

In Zimbabwe, Imbahuru means the house where the chief's family lives. It's not a place to be afraid of.



Imbahuru » fear of reporting, intimidation

The client initially stayed with friends, or in his local mosque, but at times he was forced to sleep on the streets or on night buses. He relied on charities, community organisations and the mosque for food, but would sometimes not eat for two or three days. Policemen triggered traumatic memories of his interactions with the authorities back in his home country so he would instinctively run from them whenever he encountered them while sleeping rough. This only made them suspicious and they arrested him several times. He survived like this for five years.

J is for JUNGLE

by Anonymous

Jungle is a noun. When we say jungle, we are talking about the journey through the asylum system.

As an asylum applicant, every day is a struggle. You have to fight to survive. There are a lot of dangerous animals. A lot of predators—landlords, NASS, police.... You are treated like an animal.

Sometimes, it can feel like there is no end to the jungle. No matter how long you stay in the jungle, you cannot see beyond the trees.

The King of the Jungle? The Home Office.

Jungle » the jungle of the asylum system, unfathomable and dangerous

Both the asylum and mainstream welfare benefits systems are extremely complex and difficult for most people fully to understand and navigate successfully. Clinicians reported that their clients' efforts to do so are undermined by the problems they may have in explaining their situation, and the effect that their history of torture continues to have on them. This is particularly the case for those with limited English language skills and where they may be required to disclose very sensitive information to people they do not know, in an unfamiliar, insensitive or even hostile environment, or on application forms that were not designed with such circumstances in mind.

Even where officials are receptive and willing to try and understand the situation, there may be other barriers that prevent them from doing so. In addition, inefficiencies in systems and processes in all the relevant agencies cause errors and delays in the processing of support applications.

K is for KIDNAPPING

by Buba

Kidnapping is a verb. When I talk about kidnapping I am talking about being bundled off to a detention centre.

It is the word we use to describe being taken straight from your asylum screening interview to an isolated cell. In my case, I was taken to Harmondsworth.

I was put in a car as if I was a criminal. We drove for two hours. I kept asking them where we are going. All they said was, "We are taking you somewhere for your safety." It reminded me of how, in Gambia, when they took you to prison they said they were taking you to a Five Star Hotel.

My kidnapping in the UK gave me flashbacks. It brought me right back to my torture in the Gambia. It was another form of mental torture all over again.

After my kidnapping I stayed in Harmondsworth for two weeks. I found myself in an unimaginable situation. It was horrible.

It was only when my solicitor referred my case to Freedom from Torture that I was released.

To be honest, even now, when I walk down the street I am scared of another kidnapping.



L is for LIMBO

by Henry

Limbo is a verb. When we say limbo we are talking about waiting for a Home Office decision.

We say limbo, because you are stuck in uncertainty.

I first heard it used very early on. Everybody uses it.

Hundreds of thousands of people all stuck in limbo. Waiting together, with our hope gone.

It is like treading water—you are working, working, working to survive—but... you stay in the same place.

The waiting is a form of psychological torture.

Limbo » **waiting, not knowing**

The vast majority of torture survivors in this country are asylum seekers or refugees who have fled torture in other parts of the world. They often spend months and even years in 'limbo' while decisions are taken by the Home Office and the courts about whether they will be granted the right to remain in the UK as refugees.

During this period they are almost never permitted to support themselves by working and are excluded from mainstream welfare benefits. Instead, an entirely separate asylum support system provides them with significantly lower levels of income than mainstream welfare benefits recipients, and basic accommodation where this is necessary to avoid destitution. As a result many asylum-seeking torture survivors are unable to meet essential living needs, are forced to live in poor and inappropriate housing, and experience destitution.

M is for “MONEY TO THE MINISTRY”

by Ajanthan

Giving 'Money to the Ministry' is a verb.

Back home, when you give 'money to the ministry', you don't know where it goes or what it is being used for. Your pocket is empty and you certainly won't see the benefits of handing it over!

Here in the UK, when I give money to my solicitor, I say I am giving 'money to the ministry'.

It feels like money down the toilet. It makes me feel so angry—I do not believe they are helping me, but I have no option, I cannot represent myself!

Without access to good quality legal aid, the question-mark over my head is still there.... Always there, always hanging.

All I can do is hand out 'money to the ministry' and hope for the best.

But I am not hopeful.

Money for the Ministry » **paying for legal representation without knowing if it's any use**

Particular issues highlighted by respondents to this research included disbelief of torture disclosures, or low significance attached to such disclosures, by asylum decision-makers, which gives rise to protracted legal processes.

Also difficulties in accessing and retaining good quality legal representation so that an asylum claim can be properly assembled, and so that any problems in the handling of that claim by the Home Office can be challenged quickly.

“This is one of the main problems ...we need to call our solicitors, it is very expensive and even if we try to call and the solicitor answers, it takes ages.”

“Another time when I had to call the solicitor, I struggled to save £5–£10 for mobile top up and then the solicitor said please fax the letter, so I had nothing to eat and I was sitting and crying through the night.”

N is for NAZDANA

by Amin F.

Nazdana is an adjective.

Where I am from, Nazdana is the word we use to describe someone who has had lots of love, support and sympathy from their family... who then, in a difficult situation, finds it really, really tough. The person is usually young and they see themselves as a child.

I was nazdana when I came to the UK. I was 14. I had never been starving before, everything had been provided for me. I had never been shouted at.

When I first arrived, the police picked me up and took me to the police station. They took fingerprints and a DNA swab, and I thought they were going to help me. But when they put me in a room, on my own, for more than 36 hours, I was really nazdana. I was so scared.

Now I am not nazdana. I have to look out for myself. I have to sort out all my own support, healthcare, education and housing. If there are problems, I have to deal with it.

I live in Croydon now and I often see young asylum seekers around there. They are all nazdana. I try and help them. Their eyes are full of tears.

Minors should not have to go through the pain of the asylum system.

Nazdana » a young helpless person thrown into the system, unable to cope

Clinicians working with unaccompanied children and young people in Freedom from Torture's London centre reported particular problems with the provision of 'leaving care' support, which should be provided to vulnerable young people who have been supported 'in care' for at least 13 weeks after the age of 16. 'Leaving care' services may include support with any or all of the following: finding and managing accommodation, going to school or college, finding a job, applying for and managing benefits. A pathway plan is supposed to be provided and reviewed every six months, and a personal advisor should be appointed.

In the experience of clinicians interviewed for the research, such services were very often not provided to young torture survivors when leaving care, leaving them vulnerable to destitution.

O is for ONLY-ONE-POUND

by Konica

Only-one-pound is a noun.

Every asylum seeker will be familiar with this phrase. They don't have any choice. When you are on asylum support the money the Home Office gives you is not enough. You have to look for the cheapest food—up to one pound. Anything more and you don't buy it. You can't afford it. And it is a question of survival.

But this means you don't have much choice.

My only-one-pound buffet involves rice, pasta, noodles, potatoes and ready-made pizza.

The only protein I get is nearly-expired or expired, meat.

With no nutrition or calories, you feel tired like an old man. You have no energy.

It is embarrassing to eat the cheapest food, so you eat alone.

As a survivor of torture, the reality of only-one-pound means you don't have good health and it affects your mind psychologically. You feel too weak to deal with your problems.

Only One Pound, Pension » starving on too little money

Respondents described the psychological impact of poverty. They described the need to live 'day-to-day', being unable to plan for the future or make decisions, living without hope, being dependent on others and feeling constantly anxious and vulnerable. Furthermore, they described how it feels to be poor in the UK, including feeling shamed, disregarded, looked down on, excluded from society and unequal.

"You feel different from everybody else—you feel very small."

According to clinicians interviewed for the research, inadequate diet, poor nutrition and hunger is one of the most serious and common problems experienced by torture survivors. They reported that it negatively affects their clients' mental and physical health, their mood, their cognition and concentration and their ability to engage fully in therapy and counselling sessions.

“The doctor says I have to eat a lot of protein but I cannot afford to so I’m always weak. I faint. One time I fainted at Freedom from Torture. An ambulance came. I have dizziness.”

Clients reported having to eat cheap food to prevent hunger, such as processed and “take away” food, and having to buy poor quality food that spoils quickly and has little nutritional value. Over half of all respondents said they are **never** or **not often** able to afford to buy food from their home countries, even though it’s available in the UK.

P is for PENSION

by Varun

Pension is a noun. When we asylum seekers say ‘pension’ we mean Home Office financial support, or Section 95.

We also call it a pension because it is not enough. We get £36.65* every week. With this little money I have to decide whether to spend it on food, clothes, topping up my phone, things to clean the house, toiletries, medicine and transport to friends, my solicitors and the reporting centre.

I cannot fulfil my basic needs with such a small ‘pension’.

I don’t feel free.

Give me a work permit, and then I can earn my own money and contribute to society.

* Amount correct at the time of editing.

Q is for QUEEN’S BOUNTY

by Steven

Queen’s Bounty is a noun. It refers to something charitable—an elective sustenance.

To me, it is another way of describing Home Office financial support.

When dreams are shattered, life driven to the edge, hopes strained, we find ourselves dependent on public funds: the only choice. Caught in this limbo of destitution, as asylum seekers we are lost, helpless.

In this situation we are depressed; we suffer from lack of self-esteem, and increased anxiety, the result of social discrimination. We are hardly able to find meaning in life.

But a Miracle Mother appears, issuing bounty: vouchers like manna from heaven to bruised souls, like water on a dried-up desert plant which has grown weary.

We cling to this nourishment, all that keeps us from extinction.

Yet we want to be like a tree, planted beside a stream that bears its fruits at the right time and season, and never withers or dies.

Queen’s Bounty » **support**

Clients described the poverty they had experienced in the UK in both ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ terms. ‘Absolute’ in that they were unable to meet basic living needs for food, clothing and shelter, and ‘relative’ in terms of being unable to live according to perceived ‘normal’ and ‘reasonable’ standards of life in the UK.

Specific items that people said they are unable to afford included non-prescription medicines such as painkillers and cold remedies, sanitary products, nappies for babies and personal or household cleaning products and toiletries. Apart from the potential health impacts, people also reported a loss of dignity and self-respect when they were unable to take care of themselves—and humiliation when they were forced to ask others for personal items such as sanitary towels.

R is for ROYALTY CARD

by Apple

Royalty Card is a noun.

When your application has been refused but you make a fresh claim, the Home Office gives you an Azure Card, or a Royalty Card as we call it. Every week, they top up my Royalty Card, but it is not enough.

When I use my Royalty Card, I can feel people looking at me. And it is not because I am a Royal. It is because they know I am an asylum seeker.

There is a shame attached to using this card. Sometimes they refuse you, and you have to call the Royalty Card people.

But if you don't have money on your phone, you have to just leave it. You can't use the Royalty Card for your phone. You have no other money. So you are trapped.

You can't buy whatever you want; it is getting more and more restricted.

You can buy pot noodles—but you can't buy soap. You can buy tomato ketchup, but you can't buy stamps. Or socks, or tissues, or a tube fare.

You can't even buy a postcard.

So, that's the sort of Royalty we belong to.

Royalty Card » Azure Card system

Those whose asylum claim has been refused at the initial and appeal stages can make an application to the UKVI for so-called 'Section 4' support. People supported on 'Section 4' are given an 'Azure' or cashless card which is accepted by a number of specified supermarkets and other retailers and can be used to purchase food, clothing, essential toiletries and mobile phone credit. Shop staff are not always aware of what the current restrictions are, causing confusion and difficulty at the checkout, as well as distress and humiliation to card holders.

All respondents reported delay in receiving weekly payments or failure to receive payments due to system errors, including incorrect amounts being uploaded onto cards and cards failing to function correctly at shop checkouts. This was reported to be a regular occurrence, leaving people with no food and other necessities while the problem was resolved, and exposing them repeatedly to situations in which they felt shamed and humiliated.

"I go to the store, they swipe the card and say 'you have no money', I ask them to try again and they say 'no money'. So I go without."

Respondents reported considerable variation, both between shops and in the same shop on different days, in what were deemed to be "restricted" items, resulting in anxiety every time they went shopping and regular humiliation when their purchases were refused

"Sometimes they say 'we don't accept the card' and they say 'stay by the side of the queue' while they call the manager. It is very embarrassing. I hate it; I hate the way they make me stand by the side."

Individuals reported being repeatedly questioned by shop staff about the Azure card, their entitlement to have it and whether it is their own card. Some reported being wrongly asked to produce photo ID—such as a UK passport or driving licence which asylum seekers do not have—before the card would be accepted for payment.

As claimants do not have cash to pay for bus fares they will have to walk the entire distance carrying all their purchases. They may be suffering from poor health and may have inadequate shoes and clothing to wear.

"Sometimes if I am in pain I cannot walk, cannot use the bus. I have to force myself to walk, no matter how cold or sick I am."



S is for SIVARTHRI

by Lasar

Sivarthri is a verb.

Sivarthri is the name of a Hindu festival in my home country. On this festival, you have to stay awake all night. You are not allowed to go to sleep. Your eyes must not close.

Here in the UK, we use this word to describe what it is like to live in shared Home Office accommodation. Here in the UK, we are forced to share housing with 20 or 30 other people, and sometimes you must even share your own room with one or two others. Even if my room-mate is quiet, the others in the building will keep me awake.

I am already affected by nightmares from my past. But sharing with other people means I rarely, ever, get a full night's sleep. There is always noise—shouting, arguing, crying.

It can feel like they are celebrating Sivarthri every night in shared Home Office accommodation.

I don't know if I can live like this for much more.

The government needs to respect what I, and other survivors of torture, have been through.

We need separate housing and an end to Sivarthri all year round.

Sivarthri » being kept awake by noisy neighbours in overcrowded accommodation

Clients in shared accommodation said that the lack of space made it impossible to live a 'normal' life. Although the majority had a room to themselves, they described their rooms as very cramped with no space to store belongings, food or to move around freely.

"There are seven women and five children in a six bedroom house; my room is the smallest of all the rooms there. How can I describe it? I go to the room and I sit on the bed, there is not even room for a chair. I eat sitting on the bed, I write sitting on the bed."

"Our room is really small and we do not have enough space, even for praying."

Respondents describe the shared rooms, such as the kitchen, toilet, bathroom and living room, as being inadequate for the numbers required to use them.

"I don't really use the living room or kitchen because it is quite filthy and I can't really use them. There are very long queues for the bathroom and no cleaning, no hot water."

In other cases it was the violent and abusive behaviour of other residents that was highlighted as a cause of stress and concern.

"From what I know the others are released prisoners but I don't know them. Because they have a tag they can only leave the house for 2-3 hours per day. Almost all of them have mental health difficulties so they all stay indoors all the time."

T is for TOE-LINE

by Conteh

Toe-line, a verb, is to queue up in a strict way.

In the UK we use toe-line to describe the Home Office Reporting centre queues where you'll find yourself toe-lining a lot once you've applied for asylum, time after time waiting endlessly for the decision. In my country, Sierra Leone, you waited your turn for a life or death decision.

Toe-lining here in London triggers memories of fear and feelings of panic at the checkpoints during our civil war, not knowing whether you'll pass through or be killed. The body signals if you're a marked man: bootlace marks on the legs indicate wearing of military-style boots; an index finger held rigid spells 'trigger finger' and that you're a soldier—or a rebel. Depending on who's holding the checkpoint, you'll be shot.

Or you may stand for toe-lining under a burning sun for UN or USAID relief supplies, following days relying on only salty water and wild food—a few nuts or a bit of fruits. So whatever your age, only the fittest survive.

My worst experience of toeing a line was when an Ecomog (Rebel) jet came screaming overhead and dropped a bomb on a relief food queue. I survived; my best friend did not.



U is for “UPDATE THE SYSTEM”

by Conteh

To me, the letter U stands for update the system: that is, the system of the Home Office computers.

I first came across “update the system” on a Wednesday afternoon during my time-slot at the Becket House reporting centre. I overheard a man trying to put across to the Home Officer that he'd been absent and unable to attend his previous appointment because he was ill. And the officer asked the man, “Why didn't you call the office to tell them that you were not well?” The man replied: “I am not allowed to work; I cannot claim benefit and even to report I have to walk, so how can I afford to buy phone credit?” At once another officer appeared to ask what was going on and instructed the interviewer to ‘update the system’.

This system doesn't care about other people's feelings; it says you cannot express your thoughts to them—whether your right has been violated or not; the system says they are always right and you have no right to question them about any decision they make. Sometimes, even when you know what they are doing is wrong, you just have to accept it without questioning them. But if you do question them, then they will certainly ‘update the system’. Whenever they do this it implies you've somehow challenged or been rude or violent to them. This, of course, will be detrimental to you; you fear it could cause delays in deciding your case.

A few months later I was to report on a Wednesday afternoon. I was waiting for my travel cards and the officer asked me how many cards was I getting?

“Four”, I replied.

“Why are you getting four?”

“Because I must take two buses to and from where I live”, I said.

“We are not even supposed to give you travel, we are just doing you a favour”, he said.

“How will I travel to report otherwise? Does it make sense?”

Immediately another officer stepped into the conversation. He told his colleague to update the system....

Update the System » **what they do to punish you for making trouble at the reporting centre**

Many clients described the lack of empathy shown by UKVI officials or interest in the explanation given when, for example, they arrived late for or missed an appointment. The consequences for clients included sanctions (often suspended support payments), being required to report more frequently (which imposed an increased financial burden on the individual) and having support withdrawn altogether due to 'non-compliance' with the conditions of support.

One questionnaire respondent said that being forced to miss appointments made him feel "**alone and suicidal, hopeless, scared**".



V is for VA-ASHAD

by Anonymous

Va-ashad is a noun. To live in Va-ashad is to live in a state of terror. You shake; you're scared of everything and everyone around you.

When I talk about Va-ashad in the UK I am talking about harassment.

When I first came here, the Home Office told me I had to go to Middlesbrough. They put me in a flat.

I never felt safe. My neighbours broke my windows, shouted at me and threw cigarette butts at me. One day I came home and everything was gone. There was writing on the wall: "If you come back to this house, I'll kill you".

I am never completely free from Va-ashad. I experienced it before, in my country. And when I think how we lived in Middlesbrough, I can't help but return to those memories. The nightmares will not stop. Now, here, in Victoria in London, at least I feel physically safe.

Va-ashad » living in terror

Some clients reported experiencing ongoing anxiety and fear as a result of the abuse they have experienced, which has affected their ability to trust people and have normal social contact.

Some said that the lack of social contact and activity had led them to 'over-thinking' and a preoccupation with sad, worrying and negative thoughts, including of the trauma they had suffered; many were aware that this could lead to a deterioration in their mental and physical health, but felt unable to do anything to address this.

Many focused on the fact that UKVI and other government officials did not believe they had been tortured and had 'treated us like liars'. One client described how the experience of being disbelieved in relation to their torture caused them to attempt suicide twice, after their asylum claim was refused on that basis.

W is for WINGS

by Alex

Wings is a noun. In Ingala, you say Lipapou.

When you think of wings you might think of birds or an aeroplane. Nice things...

But for me it means something very different. Getting your wings means getting deported. The first time I heard it, I was in detention. My friend was taken early in the morning, at 5 o'clock. When we went for breakfast everyone was talking about it:

"Where is Fred?"

"He was taken."

"Where?"

"To the airport."

"He's probably going to get his wings."

We were so sad. Everyone was thinking about themselves.

I got my wings three months later. Again, they came early. I complied because I knew if I protested I would be beaten. I was so frightened.

When I arrived back in the Congo, my heart was beating...BUMP, BUMP, BUMP...

Even now, when I think about getting my wings, I get frightened.

The fear is always there.

X is for X-RAY

by Anonymous

X-ray (n): the Asylum Registration Card, a piece of ID that unlocks support

No, it's not Christmas time, when cards and gifts amass at the post office. It's just the day when asylum seekers go for their weekly wages. All the counter assistants are busy counting many bank notes, yet each pile is not more than just enough to last an asylum seeker the length of the week.

For an asylum seeker, anything is enough; but try to impose that 'enough' on the legislators who decided it: no way, it'd be a national scandal.

One by one the asylum seekers collect their respective allowances. In the midst of their excitement at receiving a miserable thirty six pounds and a couple of pence, none of the other asylum seekers seems to notice their solo fellow, drenched in tears.

I approached the poor soul to find out what the matter was: all I could hear from him were the repeated words: "My X-ray! My X-ray!" in a very pained tone. "Were the results that bad?" I innocently inquired. Little did I know that I was in the world of asylum seekers and their private language. "I lost my X-ray!" he screamed, even louder. So what about your x-ray? I thought to myself.

All down the line, one by one the asylum seekers checked their 'x-rays'. It was not until then that I realised the 'x-ray' was the Asylum Registration Card (ARC). Without the precious x-ray, you can't collect your meagre allowance.

To all asylum seekers: without your x-rays you won't get your money; guard those silly plastic cards as you would guard your own precious lives.

X ray » ID card, having to prove who you are

Clients said that they had informed those assessing their case that they were a torture survivor, though they said that this had either produced no response or one of apparent disbelief.

"They dismissed everything I said. Since I had no proof, they thought I was lying."

"The interview was like an interrogation, I will never forget it."

Y is for YO-YO-ING

by George

Yo-yo-ing is a verb.

It refers to the period between receiving a positive answer on your asylum claim and getting refugee status, and actually receiving the benefits of this status—for example, employment support allowance or housing benefit.

For most survivors waiting on their asylum application, the idea of refugee status is the Holy Grail. This is the idea that your lawyers give you, the support services give you, the idea that bureaucracy at large gives you.

You are told once you get papers you are entitled to this, to get that. Everyone drums up the myth. But for someone in a vulnerable mental and physical state, it can become a big obstacle.

Before I got my refugee status, I was hanging by a shoestring, dependant on a certain network of friends and a lawyer as a point of contact with the Home Office.

Once I got my papers, that final shoestring also got cut. Because, with the transition, the shoestring goes away and I was yo-yo-ed all over the place. Again, back to square one, trying to source my housing: from Citizens Advice Bureau to other help organisations, to get legal advice, to get my benefits and my housing and all my entitlements into place.

So I was just back and forth, coming here, coming there. It's just a never-ending cycle. Everyone thinks you are sorted, but you're not, you are not sorted.

It took four months to pass the first stumbling block, just to get my foot in the door of the benefits office, let alone dealing with my physical and mental well-being. All that time I was yo-yo-ed around.

Yo-Yo-ing » the gap between getting status and receiving the benefits of that status

Delays in the payment of benefits and securing stable housing can have a very serious impact on refugees, because they are less likely to have family or friends who are in a position to offer material help, or savings and other resources to fall back on in such a situation.

“There's nothing worse for our clients than thinking all your problems have ended because you get 'status'— and then becoming homeless.”

ZERO

by Faryad

I am at Point Zero.
But with every single second, with every spring breeze,
at every sunrise, and when the trees begin to bud –
I need to rise up. I need to shine.
Need to leave Zero behind.

No possessions. No fame.
I am lost. I am lost.
There is a crisis in me.
Point Zero is my only position.
I need to stand up.
I need to be called by my original identity.

I need to find myself,
even after I have fallen off.
See, I am wriggling.
I won't stay at zero.

Zero » rock bottom

“With all this torture, I escaped and came here to save my life, but the situation here—no money, food, accommodation—is making me worse, my mental state is worse.”

“Our current living conditions keep our torture trauma still alive. We can't move on.”

Many survivors of torture feel so incapacitated by their experience of living in impoverished and insecure circumstances in the asylum system that they believe they will never be able to work and be self-reliant again.

Others described feeling as though their lives had been wasted and that when they finally achieved permission to live in the UK and a situation of 'safety', it was too late for them to be able to return to a 'normal life'.

Thanks to all members of Write to Life and the other clients of Freedom from Torture who wrote bravely, honestly and movingly about their experiences.

To our volunteer writing mentors who conjured the painful emotion into powerful writing, and everybody from the Clinical, Communications, Policy and Research teams who brought it all together.

"The Poverty Barrier" can be obtained from
http://www.freedomfromtorture.org/feature/the_poverty_barrier/7413

The A-Z podcasts can be found at
www.freedomfromtorture.org/feature/the_poverty_barrier/7689

Book design: Patricia Lewis
www.lewiscreative.co.uk

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