

# WRITTEN SUBMISSION FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO IMMIGRATION DETENTION

## MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A FORMER DETAINEE

1. My name is Penny. Until this year, when I received temporary leave to remain, I was a person seeking sanctuary in the UK, originally from Rwanda.
2. My experience of detention started one sunny Thursday morning back June 2007; I had gone to do my normal chores like what I had done for about 2/3 months. I was assisting a friend who owned an Internet cafe run it in some managerial duties. As I was tending to the cafe, I was approached by 4 gentlemen who informed me that they had a search warrant for the premises.
3. The whole process lasted about 3.5 hours; when the search was over - I was taken into custody under the ruse of assisting the 'police'. I spent almost 2 nights in the cells. Even whilst in the police station I had tried to kill myself but my therapist called me and talked me out of doing it.
4. The following evening, I was picked up and taken to what would become to me a home for the next 98 days - the detention centre that I dreaded via a few other police stations.
5. I left the police station on Friday at around 9:00pm, and arrived at the detention place on Saturday around 6:00am. This is a journey that normally takes less than 2 hours but this adventurous exercise took us almost 8 hours, because we picked up about 6 other people on the way.
6. I managed to reach the detention in one piece but having had episodes of hysterical laughs and tears. By the time we arrived I had no sense of direction. I felt lost in a wilderness like kind of way; I wished for death so that I would escape my misery but none came forth. Everything around me looked like a huge void, the people around seemed like beasts waiting to suck my blood like vampires.
7. Upon arrival, we went through several gates, til we arrived and were offered some refreshments. An officer informed me that I was due to be deported, I asked her where to and her response was, 'I thought you were aware'. She did not know when or where I would be deported. That would mark the beginning of a very long 98 days stay.
8. We were attended to by nurses/health visitors. I recall the nurse asking me among other questions, if I had been a victim of torture and I told her, 'I am a victim of trafficking and I believe I have PTSD'. I later came to learn, if you either had been through any form of abuse/torture or had mental health issues, you would get treated differently, but alas it never did happen.
9. My first 2 weeks passed by in a blur; the program was made up of shower, eat, sleep. I can only recall roughly over 100 people in our unit, but it could be more. I spent the next days not knowing whether I was going to coming, til I was released.
10. There was literally nothing to do - so you had to try and fill the void by either re-reading novels you had read a few times, feign a sickness and make up excuses of going to the healthcare services so that you may meet up with other people for a quick chat.

11. Throughout my time in detention I was depressed. I went through a period of psychotic breakdown, I had to attend a number of therapy sessions to get to my senses. I went on a hunger strike for three weeks, tried to commit suicide and was placed on suicide watch.
12. The worst thing, apart from fear and humiliation is uncertainty. I had no idea if and when I would be released or deported. I lost the sense of time because there is nothing to do apart from sit and wait.
13. I tried to tell officers about being a victim of trafficking and that it was traumatising for me to be guarded by men as my trafficker and abuser was male. But no one paid attention to my needs or mental health.
14. There are both short and long term effects of detention. I have personally experienced both, including physical effects and mental ones like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and suicidal ideations. Due to this experience I have been clinically diagnosed with depression and the trauma continues whenever I hear the word detention. Today, if anyone mentions the word detention to me, my initial reaction is freezing, feeling like a sharp-cold block of ice has been dropped on my brain and all sense of dignity and worthfulness look for the nearest exit.
15. During the asylum seeking process, detentions are used at various stages including - applications, during the reporting system which varies for different people - you can be required to report daily, weekly, monthly and more recently I have heard asylum seekers required to report twice per annum. Detention is also used quite a lot to facilitate deportations. In many European countries, deportation orders are issued concurrently with the initial rejection of the asylum claim. There is little evidence and statistics on how many asylum seekers are detained and for how long, however, there's growing evidence that detention of asylum seekers is associated with substantial trauma-related mental health problems.
16. The consequences of detention can be long-term, impacting profoundly on all areas of life; mind, body and soul regardless of whether one is allowed to stay or required to leave at the end of the whole process.
17. Asylum seekers often come from countries in conflict and many of us have experienced pre-migration adversities that may affect our health. The process of seeking asylum places additional demands on our lives. Some studies and research has established that the asylum seeking process may contribute to extreme high levels of stress and psychiatric episodes to those of us who have been previously traumatised.
18. Some other physical and mental health related issues include; psychiatric disorders, anxiety, depression, clinical, reflections on the detention centre environment including but not limited to - loss of liberty, uncertainty regarding return to countries of origin, social isolation, mismanagement of staff and officers, hunger strikes and self-harm, sleep disturbances including night terrors, disrupting behaviours among many others - to mention but a few.
19. I have always said and will say it again; detention is a place I would not want my worst enemy to ever go through. It is full of desperate and depressed people not knowing what is happening to them. Life as a detainee is no life at all.

20. Liberty of a person and freedom of movement is a fundamental principle of liberal democracies protected in all interactive and regional human rights instruments (Article 1 of the international convention of human rights and fundamental freedoms - 1950).
21. Detention however constitutes an interference with this right which is defined as "the deprivation of liberty in a confined place such as a prison or purpose built closed reception centre or holding facility in which the asylum seeker is not at liberty to leave.
22. Immigration detentions are at the centre of tensions between the interest of the state to control immigration and the individual's right to liberty - hence an asylum seeker poses a challenge as an individual potentially deserving of international protection but who awaits a final determination of their right to remain.
23. According to all that has been done; research and studies, I am pretty sure that there should be alternatives to detention. A human being does not deserve to be detained without 'good cause' and if any - it should be limited to the minimal periods ever. This is not how human beings should be treated, especially those who have already been through trauma.
24. To my personal understanding, people's liberty should not come at a price. Everyone should expect the same standard irrespective of colour, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability or age.
25. People - young and old, women and men are scared, crying from fear and anger, give them the peace and love they deserve. It's never an easy road from being called names (illegals, good for nothing, benefit scroungers) to name but a few - but it is a shameful world to live in. If there is one thing I could say to the parliamentarians running the inquiry it is this: you have the capability to end this barbaric action once and for all; if you believe in doing right and if that is you, do not pass over this chance. It may be among the few things that you will be remembered by, the ball is in your hands - it's time to do right.