

DIRECT PROVISION

“No one can live like this”

Metro Éireann, 28 November – 03 December 2008

By Louise Browne

“WE WANT to work,” says an asylum-seeking couple from Kilkenny, who left their home in Gambia over eight years ago. “We are very, very frustrated. We can’t stress how frustrated we are in this system. It feels like we are just sitting about waiting to work.

“I have done many courses, such as an accounting course,” says the female of the couple, “but I can’t do anything with them. If you want a job, you have to get your status first.

“It is so very difficult to know that I am trained as an accountant back in Gambia, but I can’t do it here because my status does not allow it.”

Currently in Ireland there are thousands of asylum seekers who are left to occupy themselves while their applications are processed. For years in many cases, such applicants are forced to be a burden on society, but it is a situation that is not of their own making.

The Irish Refugee Council has consistently campaigned for asylum seekers to be given the right to work in this country.

The council’s policy, launched on World Refugee Day 2001, equates the right to work with the right to dignity, and calls for working rights to be granted to asylum seekers six months after their applications have been lodged.

This policy has been endorsed by Cori, Ibec, the ICTU and the INOU, among others. However, seven years on and not much seems to have changed, except that more and more trained and willing workers are left to fall deeper into the black hole of State bureaucracy.

“The problem here is that without your papers, you can’t work,” says the Gambian mother of three. “The only thing you can have is the social welfare and the needs of your kids met, but I don’t want money, I want to work.”

Educational courses for asylum seekers are also restricted, she says. “Fás courses are not open to us. I have asked and said that I would pay for courses and they still say no, I need my status.

“If I get my status I plan to go to Pitman [Training, for IT skills], but I can tell you that for those six months I will not be sitting down, as I have a lot of experience, so when I am through with that I can get a job of my own. All I want is to be my own business woman.”

For most asylum seekers, the frustration and the isolation of their situation are the main issue. The long delays in the decision-making process leave asylum seekers across Ireland in limbo, not knowing whether they are staying or going.

“We just want things to get moving so we can work,” the Gambian woman adds. “We don’t know anything, we don’t get any letters or phone calls about our application, nothing, so we don’t know if we are going or what the future holds at all really.

“We have settled into life here. Right now, though, we are not sure what will happen. We can’t do anything, I am a trained accountant, but I can’t move forward.”

Isolation from society is another problem that asylum seekers face. Without the right to work, it is difficult to make friends or socialise beyond their immediate environment in direct provision.

“It can be isolating, that is why my husband got involved in football tournaments as it gets them moving, and sometimes they go away for matches or to Dublin. It is great to get involved in a socialising team to get you out and busy,” says the Gambian.

“Luckily I have my family to keep me busy; most people are here alone, and it can be very isolating for them not being involved in society and not being able to work. All you can do is sit down, lie down, go to sleep, get up, eat, sit down again, day after day. No one can live like that.”

This article was produced in association with the Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS)