

Family reunification procedures are inflexible and often cause untold stress and heartbreak, affected families told Sandy Hazel

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Keeping body and soul together, a roof over your head and the kids safe and well is a tough enough job. Indeed, finding work, a place to live and a school for your children are tasks that even the fittest find exhausting. But if you need to do all of this as an immigrant while fighting for the right to keep your family in the country, the routine becomes monumental. Natalia Muntean and her husband Andrei Andreev from Moldova found themselves in a predicament last year when Andrei's work permit expired and he could not get another job to renew his permit. He had to return to Moldova, leaving behind Natalia and their three children. Natalia explained to *Metro Éireann* that she was on a stamp four permit and had been working in Ireland for years when she met Andrei. "I had a wide circle of Moldovan friends. They would always refer people to me to help with forms or an application as my English was good." Natalia was working as a sales rep in Ireland after receiving a master's degree in human resources management from university in Moldova. "I got to know lots of people here. I met Andrei through friends. We knew each other a long time before we got married." Andrei has a care assistant qualification from medical college in Moldova but worked in construction in Ireland for three years. "We were shocked when he could not get his permit renewed," says Natalia. "I think that was when they started to put restrictions onto the application. A new employer tried to get one for him but couldn't." Andrei explains: "When I couldn't get a job without a permit, and couldn't apply for a permit without a job, it was a very bad situation for me. Employers don't realise it can be straightforward to apply, but they are put off by the thought of paperwork."

Andrei stayed in the country trying to sort out more work but eventually he was advised to leave. "Andrei went to the immigration service to see what the options were," says Natalia. "They said that as the permit was expired it would be better to leave and that we may have a chance of Andrei re-entering Ireland under the family reunification programme." Natalia and Andrei were unsure. Should he try to stay illegally and chance finding work, or gamble on his returning to Moldova and getting a permit to come back? "We had just had a baby and I was on maternity leave. It was very hard but we decided that Andrei should go back to Moldova and try to get work there."

While Andrei was looking for work in Moldova, Natalia filled in the forms and applied for family reunification. "We were totally shocked when the application was turned down. We had both been working and paying taxes, Andrei was the father of Irish-born children and we really thought that we would get it. I just did not know what to do." The application for family reunification was turned down because of the period that Andrei had remained in the country illegally after his permit had expired. "I was travelling in to the city everyday to bring my eldest son to school and then on to the solicitors with my other two babies to try to organise the reunification. It was crazy. Some days the solicitor had to hold a baby while we were in discussions." Natalia contacted the Immigrant Council of Ireland, who advised the family about the appeal process. "They were able to offer advice and support. They offered me a solicitor to help to write the letters and explained that they could not have the power to change the decision but would help outline the appeals procedure."

The solicitor helped Natalia to detail exactly why Andrei had remained in the country and what he had been doing during that time – that is, trying to find work and renew his permit. "We were able to provide dates and prove that all the time he was making efforts to put things right, and that when it didn't happen he did leave. We never applied for social welfare or anything like that." All the time that the appeal was going through Natalia was feeling stressed. "I just kept wondering what we would do if the appeal was also refused," she says. A trip to Moldova to visit Andrei proved that living there would be impossible: "There was no way we could have afforded to live there with three children."

Finally, the couple's family reunification appeal was granted and they were reunited in Ireland just before Christmas 2007. "I could not believe it," says Andrei. "I thought that she was joking when she told me." Natalia adds: "It is a huge relief. He only has a stamp three permit which means that we cannot get a mortgage and we must rent. He will now try to get work at a hospital. But that is another battle as he needs to be registered for assistant work, but cannot get registered without the work experience. "But at least there are now two of us here, I can return to work and the children have their

father back.”

‘It is very hard for a mother to raise these children on her own’

Another immigrant from Nigeria who is currently applying for family reunification also emphasises the stress his situation is causing. “My wife is here since 2003 and I joined [her and our children] in 2007,” says the Dundalk-based man, who didn’t want his name published. “I have Irish-born children. We are now a family of five and I am the only one who is not here permanently. “It is very hard for a mother to raise these children on her own. I was only able to be here on visas and I was away from my family for too long in between. I learned that I could apply for family reunification and be here too but it has been going on a long time now.

“Not knowing is hard. If it is refused then I would hope for the minister’s discretion. I know that they will look at economic circumstances as part of the process and my own financial circumstances are good. I am an IT expert and a professional. I will be working and contributing to the economy. We will be supporting ourselves and not depending on anyone.

“At the moment I am minding the kids and am a stay-at-home dad which is hard work, too. My wife is working but her salary is not enough for five of us at the moment.”

When you are filling in miles of paperwork in a second language and wondering if the decisions you are making are the right ones, it is wise to seek advice from organisations such as the Immigrant Council of Ireland (immigrantcouncil.ie) and the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (mrci.ie) – or if you are a refugee, the Irish Refugee Council (irishrefugeecouncil.ie) and the Refugee Information Service (ris.ie).

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