

# **Between Two Cultures**

*Inspirational Stories of Young  
Migrant Women in Ireland*

Published by AkiDwA, The African and Migrant Women's Network  
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This publication contains a collection of inspirational stories of young migrant women. The women's stories were collected and compiled by Aedín Kelly and were edited by Patrick Guerin. AkiDwA cannot accept responsibility for the factual accuracy of the information presented by the contributors. The views expressed are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of AkiDwA.

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Finally AkiDwA would like to thank the Dublin City Council and The Community Foundation for Ireland for support with the young migrant women project and with the publication of this book.

## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to the second generation immigrant currently in Ireland, in particular to un-accompanied minors who have arrived in Ireland over the decade looking for protection and hope for a better life. May your stories, courage and struggle allow for a crucial process of healing, learning and transformation in a changing Ireland.

## **Forward from the Ombudsman for Children**

As Ombudsman for Children, a significant part of my role involves listening to the voices of children and young people and highlighting issues of concern to them. Although I try to give voice to their concerns, nothing is more powerful than hearing their own experiences, in their own words. In my experience significant change can be brought about when young people are given an opportunity to tell their stories to those in authority that are willing to listen.

AkiDwA has done a fantastic job facilitating and presenting the voices and stories of young migrant women in this book. Their stories are thought provoking and inspirational for all of us. From unimaginable difficulties faced by some of these young women to the everyday challenges of adapting to life in a new country faced by others, courage and determination to succeed are pervasive themes throughout this publication.

With this book, these young women offer you an insight into their lives and experiences, their fears and their dreams. They hope that if you are someone in a position of power, that you will listen to these stories and let them influence the way you support and assist migrant women in Ireland.

*Emily Logan*  
**Ombudsman for Children**  
**Ireland**

## AkiDwa Background

Akina Dada wa Africa, (AkiDwa), Swahili for sisterhood, is a national network of migrant women living in Ireland, established in 2001 by a group of African women to address issues of gender discrimination, racism and domestic violence. The non-governmental organisation is a representative body for migrant women living in Ireland, irrespective of their national or ethnic background, religious beliefs, socio-economic position or legal residency status. AkiDwa membership is diverse, with over 2,250 individual members, of various residency status in Ireland, from 35 countries of origin and 34 migrant and civil society organisation affiliates. AkiDwa advocates with, and on behalf of, migrant women.

AkiDwa vision is a just society where there is equal opportunity and equal access to resources in all aspects of society: social, cultural, economic, civic and political. AkiDwa mission is to promote equality and justice for migrant women living in Ireland. AkiDwa promotes the equality of migrant women in Irish society, free of gender and racial stereotyping. The organisation applies a holistic approach to integration, promoting a migrant and gender-specific approach to public services as well as encouraging migrant women's access to mainstream services and initiatives. AkiDwa supports migrant women's greater participation in Irish society. The organisation works toward empowering migrant women to represent their concerns to decision makers as well as working on behalf of vulnerable women in policy and decision making structures.

In 2011 AkiDwa undertook a formal evaluation in parallel to its ten year anniversary celebrations. The evaluator's review sessions with AkiDwa members, Board, staff, participating funders and organisations found the organisation have accomplished much on behalf of, and with, migrant women living in Ireland over the past decade. AkiDwa has become an established authority and a sought-after representative voice in human right and migrant community sectors, in state and semi-state structures and on the international stage through its gender based violence and gender discrimination work.

AkiDwa has led, and been a crucial part of, successful stakeholder campaigns for legislative and policy reform to ensure the rights and entitlements

of migrant women and girls living in Ireland. The organisation has held consultative sessions with women and submitted proposed policy and legislation to address arising concerns to State and semi-state structures. One of its key major strength has been the approach of work and direct contact with migrant women. AkiDwA has held focus groups and produced submissions to Government. AkiDwA awareness raising, capacity building programmes and personal support has been delivered to over five thousand migrant women and four thousand workers in service provider organisations, including medical practitioners and health care professionals.

AkiDwA evaluation highlighted the organisation's reach to vulnerable groups and its embedment in migrant communities across Ireland. Many members fed back that their involvement with AkiDwA has had a strong and positive influence on their lives and the lives of other migrant women living in Ireland. Delivery of capacity building programmes, and work with mainstream service providers, has informed the way local organisations and public service providers meet the needs of migrant women living in their communities. AkiDwA overall successes and strengths as an organisation were rated by organisations taking part in the evaluation at 79%. The organisation currently regularly liaises with legislators, Government departments and statutory agencies and works in coalition and in partnership with key NGOs in the areas of migration, gender equality and human rights to progress solutions to key concerns of migrant women.

In March 2011 AkiDwA launched a new strategic plan for 2012 - 2015, the plan is based on recommendations from the organisation evaluation of a decade of work in Ireland. Four strategies were prioritised in this plan to inform the organisation's next three years of work: 1. Building capacity of migrant women and migrant groups, 2. Influencing and informing policy, 3. Awareness-raising of key issues and concerns of migrant women, 4. Organisational development.

## **AkiDwA work with Young Migrant Women**

Recent Census figures have confirmed that migration into Ireland continues and that numbers of non-Irish foreign nationals have increased in the period since the last Census of 2006. The number of Irish residents who were born outside Ireland continues to increase and stood at 766,770 in 2011 an increase of 25 per cent on 2006, and accounting for 17 per cent of the population (CSO 2011)

Almost two-thirds (63.7%) of people in ethnic groups other than White Irish were under 35. Just 3 per cent of people in these ethnic groups were 65 or older confirming the younger age profile of migrants. Among the total non-Irish community the number of women increased by 39.0 per cent or 76,500 since 2006. This compares with an increase of 48,200 in non-Irish men, representing an increase of 21.5 per cent.

AkiDwA has been engaging with young migrant women since its establishment in 2001, as a part of its target group, i.e. migrant women living in Ireland. In 2007 AkiDwA proactively started to focus on Young Migrant Women (YMW) as a specific group. The organisation has since provided information and support and has engaged YMW in various activities. On 8th March 2012 during the International Women's Day AkiDwA chose the theme: connecting young migrant women inspiring futures, so as to support and publicise work with young migrant women. Earlier in 2010 AkiDwA established the Young Migrant Women Forum. The forum is open to all young migrant women resident in Ireland, aged 18-35.

While young migrants are generally expected to have integrated well into the community and to benefit from mainstream services and activities, many of them are living on the margin. There are no organisations that are specifically targeting young migrants. From the feedback gathered by AkiDwA during the forum meetings and consultations and from the analysis of the support offered to young migrant women by AkiDwA to date, it is very clear that this group of migrants is one of the most vulnerable and in need of support. Some of the key issues and challenges facing young migrant women include-



**Access to third level education:** Most of the young migrant women arrived in Ireland as children or under the residency permits of their parents. While they are able to access and participate in both primary and secondary level education, majority are unable to progress to third level due to high fees, as they are required to pay international fees.

**Community engagement at a local level:** Majority of the young migrant women do not engage in any community activity at a local level, they lack an entry or a way of engaging with a wider community which could be due to fear of not being accepted or experience of racism.

AkiDwA believes that young migrant women should be encouraged and empowered to reach their full potential. The organisation's main objective is to build the capacity of young migrant through training, involvement and engagement in the organisation's work. This will contribute to the greater empowerment of the younger generation that might influence successive generations of migrants in Ireland.

In order to progress with its work with young migrant women and with support from The Community Foundation for Ireland, AkiDwA commissioned a researcher to carry out a pilot study on young migrant women in Ireland, in August 2012. The aim of the research was to explore the immigration history of young migrant women; their life in Ireland; integration prospects and future aspirations. The research has been completed and the outcome of this research will inform and direct future work.

## About the Project

The Inspirational Stories Project stems from AkiDwA development of the Young Migrant Women's Forum. This forum was established in 2010 and is open to migrant women resident in Ireland between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years.

The Forum was specifically designed to connect and inspire young migrant women in their future. Since its development, AkiDwA has worked to build the capacity of young migrant women who are a part of the Forum through training, involvement and encouragement in the organisation's work.

Its overall aim is to empower and encourage young migrant women to reach their full potential.

The stories documented here offer an insight into the lives, experiences, thoughts, achievements and dreams of young migrant women living in Ireland today.

The medium of a storybook was specifically chosen for this project because it provides a space for young migrant women to become their own storytellers. This is of crucial importance because so often the experience and situation of migrant women are not voiced by the women themselves, but instead by a third party, commonly resulting in a misrepresentation of their reality. Providing these women with the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words, has a power and an impact like no other. Put simply, it gives them a voice.

While the stories told here touch on, in some shape or form, the difficulties and struggles these young women have encountered in their lives so far, this is not their focus. Instead, what dominates is what these women have achieved and continue to achieve, along with their determination to fulfill their dreams. All this proves that when young migrant women have the opportunity to reach their full potential they can create powerful and positive change, in themselves, in their communities and in their world.

Informing Irish society of this reality- especially those in service, policy provision and in education- is not only one of the goals of this project, but a necessity in a current and increasingly ethnically diverse Ireland.

Providing these women with the opportunity to tell their stories through this storybook has been a means of giving these women a voice where their words are not taken by anyone else but instead are completely their own. The power of being your own storyteller must never be underestimated. It allows for the true reality to be revealed, exposing unique and incomparable sets of feelings, talents, goals, experiences, thoughts and dreams.

Each story told here is not simply a story, but an inspirational one. The achievements, aspirations, dreams and outlooks of these young women will serve to inspire each reader to truly understand the importance of AkiDwA mission, namely to promote equality and justice for migrant women living in Ireland. The compiling of a storybook was chosen as the suitable platform for bringing about this mission because we believe that **equality and social justice for migrant women in Ireland requires migrant women to be given a voice, not to be represented as victims or problematic subjects, but as subjects in their own right representing themselves.** AkiDwA believes that the younger a migrant woman can experience having a voice, telling their stories and the true realities of their lives, the more they will be encouraged to reach their full potential, a positive outcome not only for their own lives, but for broader society also.

What struck me most throughout my time speaking to these women was the strength, determination and ambition that each communicated to me. Each word spoken by these women served to highlight how it should never solely be the difficulties, discrimination and barriers that most migrant women unfortunately experience that wider society focus on, but instead the focus should fall on the ways in which young migrant women have surmounted these obstacles, what they have achieved, their future dreams and aspirations, and their vision for a better Ireland.

Each word spoken by these women has inspired me to continue my commitment to the establishment of an Irish society where equality and social justice exists for all migrant women, with no exceptions.

I hope these stories will inspire you in the same way.

*Aedín Kelly*

*“The power of being your own storyteller must never be underestimated”.*

**SECTION 1**  
***Insight from within***

This section feature view and insight of Salome Mbugua, AkiDWA CEO and Amaka Okonkwo, former development and event coordinator that worked with young migrant women

*“There is no agony like bearing an untold  
story inside of you”.*

Maya Angelou

## Picturing Hope Through Their Eyes

In 2006 the Louth African Women's Group approached me to be a guest speaker during the official launch of their group. To my surprise they requested that I focus my presentation on challenges faced by migrant parents in rearing their children in Western culture. First I felt challenged, then overwhelmed. Actually as a founder and CEO of AkiDwA I got the opportunity to give presentations and speeches both at national and at international levels on different topics, but the one posed to me by the Louth women group had never attracted my attention. While still exploring how to approach my presentation Maureen, my now twenty-three year old daughter, entered into our sitting room. The conversation that followed suddenly reminded me that I was one of the migrant parents in Ireland. I therefore came to figure out what the Louth African Women's Group was looking for.

I remembered, while growing up as a young woman in Kenya, how my father was very strict. None of my siblings were allowed to leave our home compound, have boy or girl friends, all my friends were known to both my parents and priority was given to studying and working hard. I was also expected to help with house chores and look after my younger siblings. Within many African cultures the child belongs to the village and, as a young person, you are expected to respect your elders; neighbours mind each other's children, they can also discipline them if they find them behaving contrary to the community norms.

When I arrived in Ireland Maureen was only five years old, she had lived at my family home and had grown up in the village where the role of bringing her up did not only lay on me but was the responsibility of the entire family and village. After a few years in Ireland Maureen adapted very well, she was assertive, over confident, she could answer every question, even the most obvious one such as "where are you from" without any hesitation. She knew about the environment and structure of "our new home", she had a lovely voice and loved performing in school and she eventually joined the Tullamore Gospel Choir where she entertained and moved many souls with her singing talent. She was a member of a Billy Barry Music and Dance troupe for over five years which increased her self-esteem and confidence greatly. She was very well known in our local community. At the time of my presentation for the Louth African Women's Group, I was undergoing a major transformation. And this was thanks to my daughter; she made me look at life differently and challenged me in so many ways.

One of the biggest challenges and that I would not come to terms with was when Maureen joined a group of Goths. All her clothes and make up were black. The group were all around sixteen years old and used to meet every Saturday at the Central Bank on Dame Street. One of her friends from the school had introduced her to the Goths. I never understood the logic behind this group. Due to my own inner fear I used to monitor her by hanging around the corner most Saturdays to watch her movements. Being a black youth, she was even more identifiable than all the others in her company and I feared for the worst. While I found her engagement with the group unacceptable, to her it was a way of socialising and engaging with friends, a way of having fun.

Bringing up my daughter in Ireland was actually a challenge for me. I realised that her growing independence created family tensions because my expectation was for her to behave the same way I did. I felt she was becoming “too Westernised” and at the same time I could see her struggle with the frustration of living in two cultural worlds, one old and one new. Other migrant parents have also related similar experiences to me.

Migrant children growing up in Ireland have been influenced very much by social media. With almost everyone having a mobile phone and access to the internet, they can access all the information, good or bad, that is available. Their demands and behaviour are influenced by what they read or see. It is with no doubt that life in the West has been greatly influenced by what I call a ‘Hollywood style’ and involving such things as smoking, drinking, as well as sex and drugs. Reinforced by modern technology and social media, such things are not in any way exceptional to our migrant youth.

It is not surprising to note that conflict between migrant parents and their children has been most of the time heightened around the issues of socialization with opposite gender friends, codes of behaviour, issues of rights and freedoms, and expectations for academic performance. Migrant women in particular have a parenting style that centres on the collective family, respect for elders, corporal punishment and interdependence. Yet, upon our arrival and after few years of settling in our country of destination, children that we bring with us become youths and at this stage they learn about the new culture, its norms, rules and regulations. Young people quickly get tuned to their current environment, they become independent and look for their freedom. We can therefore, never expect them to behave like ourselves, as when we were growing up, like for example, in Africa. The lack of extended family supports in a new country remains a huge challenge to many migrant parents.

While it is very difficult to expect migrant parents to dismiss their cultural norms, it's equally important to understand their background and parenting style. Many countries around the world have legal protection for children which may be undermined by migrant parents who are very much used to different principles and values. The Children's Act in Ireland, for example, may appear to some migrant parents as tight and overly-protective of children.

Migrant parents need to familiarise themselves with the laws that guide and protect children here in Ireland to avoid coming into conflict with the State. Programmes to support both migrant parents and children are crucial in addressing this issue. These programmes should explore ways of encouraging migrant parents to allow their children independence in a way that does not reject their traditional and cultural identity, rights and values. They must also incorporate training in Irish family laws and how they relate to parenting so as to enhance understanding and reduce pressure, misunderstanding and prevent future problems.

AkiDwA Young Migrant Women's Project was an idea that was triggered by one migrant youth who visited our premises in 2007. The young girl had migrated to Ireland with an uncle but needed support since her relationship with the uncle had fallen apart. As she sat in my office and explained to me about her future dreams I felt hopeful and motivated. Through her eyes I pictured a different Ireland, I saw a completely transformed Ireland where a diversity of women representatives will be featured in all aspects of life, social, economic and political. I could envisage a future with young migrant women lawyers in our chambers, with migrant women politicians in the Dáil.

There is no doubt that the second generation immigrants, who are now youths, have so much to contribute to the successful integration of migrants in Ireland. The majority of them are very competent, confident and very ambitious. They are engaged fully in different fields and are taking up highly skilled training in the areas of science, technology, law, etc.

**My eyes and hopes therefore lie with the migrant youth for shaping our future.**

*Salome Mbugua*  
CEO- AkiDwA

## They want to see Ireland on Top

In working with the group the aim was to educate, inform and support them in order for them to attain their full potential. We started meeting once every month to analyze the needs of the group. The group had a good bond which was created by the good relationship structure in place between me and the women. AkiDwA as an organisation was very instrumental to this due to its leadership style and good organizational practices. There was great understanding and respect within the group and this fostered unity and productivity. The women had so much potential both individually and collectively. During the forming stage of the group, I discovered they have so much to offer to Irish society. Their talents, skills, experience and qualifications were unparalleled. On August 28th 2011, the group organized a talent show which until today has been unequalled. These women simply needed support, recognition of their talents and skills. Many were entrepreneurs capable of boosting the Irish economy. The evidence of this was seen on August 25th 2012 when the group organized the first ever summer camp in Dublin. The highlight of the event was the activities, which included bead making, baking, African fabric designing, music workshops, drama script writing etc. They were happy with the outcome. However, there is no adequate support to empower them and enable them achieve sustainable development.

“A group that has a membership of about forty girls with over twenty nationalities represented is amazing”

An International Women's Day event on 8th March 2012, organised by AkiDwA to inspire young migrant women in Ireland, drew a great crowd from diverse backgrounds and encouraged much enthusiasm. A video clip was screened by the group showing the aspirations of these women for their lives and for Ireland in the next five years. They have so much hope for themselves and passion for Ireland and were ready to do something to bring about positive change. Again, these women hoped to get sustainable aid to develop. They wanted to see Ireland on top. It was at this event that the group announced that the book; *Inspirational Stories of Young Migrant Women In Ireland* would be written. This is the book that is being launched today. The involvement of international researchers also added to the taste of this book. I wish to voice my sincerest appreciation to Salome Mbugua and her team for making the dream of educating; informing and supporting young migrant



women to reach their full potential come true.

**I experienced the richness of diversity working with this group of young women.** A group that has a membership of about forty girls with over twenty nationalities represented is amazing. This is a very strong attribute of the group.

*“A group that has a membership of about forty girls with over twenty nationalities represented is amazing”.*

The greatest limitation of the group is funding which had discouraged the group on embarking on some of the viable projects they desire to work on. The abandonment of such projects was so unfortunate and could have been avoided with a little financial support.

As I end this piece, I want to thank Salome Mbugua again for believing in me, for trusting and handing the leadership of this group to me while I was working with AkiDwA. Salome has inspired me so much as she has done for many women in Ireland. Working with AkiDwA as the Event and Development Officer and coordinator of young migrant women has left me with a wealth of experience of working with a group in the community sector. I have witnessed the frustrations a group with good intentions can face when it is financially incapacitated. I have also felt the agony of the intended beneficiaries of a project when they did not get the support they needed to make their life or situation better. Having to abandon good projects was hard especially when so much work had been put into them. It is extremely difficult to have developed strong capacities which then cannot be utilized.

Despite some difficulties, coordinating the young migrant women project has been one of the most positive and rewarding opportunities I have experienced. It has progressed in my qualification and experience as a development worker and most importantly has connected me to an amazing group of women. These women are fabulous and fantastic to work with.

*Amaka Mercy Okonkwo*

Amaka Mercy Okonkwos is a former development and event officer of AkiDwA, she is currently pursuing a course in Development studies in Kimmage Manor

## **SECTION 2**

### ***Personal narratives of migrant women in Ireland***

On the following pages, young migrant women tell their stories.

While each story is different, what they share in common, is that they are all inspirational.

*“Equality and social justice for migrant women in Ireland requires migrant women to be given a voice”.*

**“The only girl interested in politics”**  
**Naomi**

I am here ten years, I came when I was nine years old with my family. Leaving was a political issue, I was so young. It had something to do with my mum’s side, her mum is Rwandan, and the love story between Congo and Rwanda is not very nice, and also my grandfather was a politician so, based on that, my parents had to flee. And I stayed in the Congo for three years without my parents, I lived with my grandparents. I joined my parents here in 2003.

When I arrived I couldn’t speak English, I had none at all, and that was the worst experience ever! Not being able to speak the language and realizing that in this new place no one knew me, no one knew who I was. Which, when I think about it now, was really hard for me, even though I was only young? The thing was, my grandmother, she used to work in the school I used go to, so I was well known, I had lots of friends; I suppose I can say that I was popular. But then when I came here, what was weird that no one knew me, I had no friends. It was so new to me. It was so weird to just be someone unknown, like I had that feeling of being unknown and it made it even harder for me. And also the fact that if it had been a French country I would have just walked up to people, and say like hello, but since I had no English, I would say to myself I will just have to stay in my corner. I remember one day, I cried because **a girl came up to me during lunch. She was just being nice asking me my name, but because I couldn’t understand, I just kept repeating ‘I am from the Congo’ but she was like that’s not what I’m asking!** And I just cried, and went home early that day. I do remember that vividly, like it’s in my memory. So when I went to college, I think this memory came back to me because it was having a different experience at college, I could talk to everyone!

When I arrived I went to school. There was no waiting. My mum said it was the better choice not to wait, to just go straight in. We had the French channel for a while, but then they took it away, everything French was taken away. I remember other children on the road would call to the door to see if I would come out, and I would just want to run away but my mum always

made me. And I used to think why is she being so cruel, but then after two or three months I started to understand. And I met other people, who had come around the same time, and I had better English than them and I realized why my mum had done what she had done, like I realized that once you get the language you will adjust to society too.

So the language was crucial because it is the basis of communication. Once you can't communicate with people you tend to stay back, you can be miserable, because you can't go out, you can't play, you're just by yourself. And that can bring a lot of things. Like once you are always by yourself you can start thinking bad things, you don't see the future, you just see where you are right now, but once you have the communication, you are able to understand, and people are able to understand you. And that is crucial, to adjusting to society.

Even though in many ways I feel Irish, I am happy that I am not only Irish, if you know what I mean. I think I have found that I am privileged to bring something new. So it is not always the same. It is not always the same conversation, I feel like I bring something different. But even my group of friends, it is mixed. We all bring a different touch, and that is what makes us stick. And also it serves as an example, like of all the prejudice in the world, I think once you get close to a person of a different culture and you try to understand their point of view, that just makes you look at it in a different way. It is not always easy to completely understand, but you need to try. And it is a good element of the social circle that I have found myself in.

Having a close group of friends, that is totally mixed in terms of nationality has made situations a lot easier, and has helped me get to where I am now. Like for example, if I look at school. Because I wasn't just in the environment or circle of friends from my own community, like just the Congolese, I was able to learn other things. After primary school, everyone from the Congolese community went straight to the community college near home. Because that is what they knew. But I had different friends, contacts, and a friend's parent was talking to my mum one day and said she wasn't sending her child to the community school, and that there was another school I could go to, and that meant I got a chance to get out and go to a different school. I think if I didn't have friends, or if my family hadn't extended their social circle outside of the Congolese community, I wouldn't

have got the chance to go to this secondary school, and also that after Junior Cert, I wouldn't have gone on to do the Leaving Cert, because others from my community, that came at the same time, just automatically went on to do LCA because that's what they believed they had to do. But because I knew, because I was hanging around with different people, you know I heard them say that you should go and do the Leaving Cert, that it makes it easier to get into college and stuff like that. And that you are totally able to do it, so that's just one example of how things got better, because I didn't just stick to my own community, I opened myself, and my family did, to the Irish culture, and stuff like that.

*“I am now studying philosophy and politics.”*

**Now I am studying Philosophy and Politics, I am in my second year.** Studying this is a decision I made in sixth year of school. I think I was a bit of an unusual case, because you know when you were in school, and people don't really know what they want to do, like they have ideas, but they aren't really sure. Well I was. I knew! And I guess it all came from the fact that I liked debating, **I would actually take time out of my day and sit down and listen to what was going on in the Dáil**, no one else would get this, and be like to me, “what are you doing?”, but, I just found it interesting. I think also, I have always wanted to get involved in human rights and make a difference. When choosing a college course then, I saw that politics would be a good pathway into this. That it could lead me on to the UN. One memory I have was in First Year, and our lecturer asked who was really interested in politics or who more so in Human Rights. **And I was the only girl who said that I was interested in politics. It was funny.** Me, and then a lot of the guys. All the girls said human rights. And I think why I said politics is because I like the part of politics that questions. I want to explore so many things. I want different experiences, environments. And this is why I am going to go on Erasmus. The issues now that I am interested in always touch on human rights, like at the moment, everything relating to women's equality, children's rights, the position and condition of asylum seekers in Ireland. But politics is still there, it is still an option, it is no way in the background.

I think my passion for human rights is somehow attached to my background. Like I am from the Congo, I was born there and spent part of my childhood there and it is a country where there are a lot of human rights problems, the whole idea of the violation of human rights, people here are aware to some degree, but haven't seen it. I have, or I have a closer connection to it, I grew up in the atmosphere, like I knew what was going on there, and knowing this just makes my passion to change things so much stronger. I think this relates to how I knew from such an early age, and long before most of my other classmates that I wanted to pursue this path in human rights. So in many ways, my background, the particular environments I had been exposed to, affect my will to really pursue what I believed in. It is important to have both the will and the interest. I feel that I have a the urge to make a difference, to change things for the better. But that is not to say that I feel I am obliged by society to pursue these goals, not that it is a burden, but just because I am from a certain place where life is one way and then came somewhere else and there was a difference, I saw a contrast. I have lived in the Congo, and left the Congo. And I have always wondered why I did, and that wonder of why I left the Congo brought me to find out more about human rights, why there is huge immigration, everything. And then living here, I came to understand what actually human rights are. I had the contrast between two places. And this contrast is what I feel gives me inspiration; I have seen that human rights do exist, and can be protected successfully. In some ways, I suppose it is somewhat sad that often you have to have seen the difficulties and the hardship to really have a connection to it, and really have that inspiration, and motivation, to do something about it.

I do have a desire to go back to the Congo, and I have done. But I went back to explore, to see, as a tourist. And in terms of pursuing my goals, one being to bring an end to the violation of human rights in the Congo, I feel I can do a better job of that from Ireland, or another country, not just from within the Congo. **I feel that here, or somewhere else, I will be equipped with more useful tools, so I can make a better change.** But definitely, I want to spend time in the Congo. To experience my culture, to know about my culture. It is really important to me. I think this comes from the idea that so many have an understanding of Africa only as a poor continent, as one of suffering. I suppose that when this is all you see, you start to think this is the

only reality. So this is the only picture of Africa, of African culture. And this limits people's understanding of what the continent and culture are really like. People focus only on one side, say the suffering, and they do not see the culture, the rich culture of Africa.

*"I want to work in the UN".*

For instance, I think of India, everyone knows there is so much poverty there, but at the same time there is such a vibrant idea of Indian culture out there, the food, the clothes, the traditions. This is seen too. The good and the bad. And this is because of the way it has been portrayed. It just makes me think of where we are now in the world. With globalization, everything is becoming so inter-connected. So, to know about cultures and traditions, the focus should not only be on the negative or difficult sides. And I even see it at home, with my younger sister. Like if my mom suggests what about going back to the Congo for a holiday, my sister would reply, "but mom, people are suffering there". They see this because this is all they have seen, this is really all they have been taught about or told about in school, by the TV, the radio. They don't know about the country and the culture. And this is what I wanted to avoid, this kind of limited understanding. I want to be able to say that beyond the suffering, there is a culture.

In many ways I think it comes back to education, to schools and curriculums- and I know I am only referring to Ireland but that is because it is the curriculum I am familiar with. Like where do we learn about the African culture, about the country? I think of my mom, like she was educated in the Congo and if you ask her she could tell you everything about the French revolution, or about the United States, it's history, revolutions. So in Africa, she was educated in Western history. In this way then, why don't we learn **and more people are moving, people are becoming more interconnected and this means that there is not just one culture, but many cultures coming together so why don't we know more about them?** I really believe that if there was more knowledge, people would integrate better, the stigma that can surround certain groups and prevent integration, would be reduced, and therefore so many problems and issues would be reduced, racism- all that. And I really believe this can be achieved through educating people on the cultures, country backgrounds and traditions of the people and groups they are living with in society.

Recently I was at an African Forum meeting, I was speaking at it, providing a young person's perspective on integration. It wasn't easy... because those on this forum are adults, they are older, they haven't grown up in Ireland. They were talking about the barriers, like cultural barriers, between African and Ireland, the effects this can have on their children's behavior, or what they view as acceptable behavior. This is why it wasn't easy for me, because I was trying to explain that I integrated here through going to school. For them, on the other hand, the root of their culture is Africa. But I have both. Like I have a Western way of thinking I suppose, I was educated here, but then at home, from my parents, there are African and Congolese ways of thinking, and understanding. But, I was born in the Congo, I did spend a part of my life there. So there is still a connection, but my parents cannot say for example that I have a Congolese way of thinking, because I left the Congo so young, and **I suppose your real way of understanding and thinking of the world is still developing at that age.** And I think this is a problem for some of the adults, they don't really see that their children are growing up in a culture that isn't African, I mean it is there within their homes, within families, but outside of that. And this lack of understanding is creating a barrier. My point at the forum then was that it is not just what the Irish can do but what parents that aren't from here but are raising their children here can do- so it is not just a kind of blame on the Irish, but the realization that they themselves have to help in the integration, it needs to come from both sides.

And there are the issues of migrant children in State care, which is one I am interested in. Here, a lot of migrant parents feel that the Irish State doesn't understand their culture, ways of raising children- but it is not just that. They need to understand that their children have adjusted to a totally different environment to them. That there are different ways children are raised. When they don't see this, you hear them say that their children are rebels, that they do not respect their home culture, their parents values, all that. But it is not rebellion. It is that they have adapted, integrated and learned in a different environment and culture to their parents. And this is totally understandable. This is what I feel the parents need to realize.

Even things like homosexuality, LGBT- a lot of migrant parents wouldn't understand this, they see it as an abomination. But for their kids- it is totally different. Like for me, I understand. I see that it is a right for people to have



whatever sexuality they wish. And that is a direct reflection of the culture and environment I have lived in, grew up in. **But just because I have accepted and understand different ways of thinking, this doesn't mean that I am losing my cultural roots**, or that I don't want to know them. But instead, I am combining them. I am making almost a culture of my own. Sometimes I feel like I have created my own world.

I think this feeling is related to why I decided to stand for the Irish Forum, at first I wasn't sure. But then I realized that I could make a difference. At this Forum I wanted to speak about how integration must take a youth perspective- it cannot just be from an older point of view. In addition, there needs to be a new integration programme, one that acknowledges the different situations of the people actually integrating. So at the Forum I talked of how there are three different groups: those born here, then those that come with their parents at a young age, and then asylum seekers that come by all their various situations and circumstances so that an affective integration programme can be implemented.

*“Everything can be combined, you don't just have to have one, you can have three”.*

While I embrace Ireland, for me keeping the culture of my roots, my Congolese roots, is so important to me. I might be an Irish Citizen, and feel Irish but I know that I came from the Congo. I speak Lingala which is the language of that my parents spoke. And at home in the house, we speak English, Lingala and French. Friends are always so fascinated by this. And that is because my parents want to keep us aware of our roots. And I am happy about this. Everything can be combined, you don't just have to have one, you can have three! And I think cultural difference is so interesting, like it fascinates me. I can't see why you wouldn't want to know about other cultures, I just love the differences between them, exploring this. I guess the differences attract me more than the similarities. And I really believe that when you are aware of differences, it helps so much with dealing with issues like racism, stigma, and discrimination. I think it can reduce the rush to judgment, because people can say, okay, they have a legitimate reason for acting like that, you know, so you can't really judge on the basis of this. Like it's their way, their opinion. Overall, I think differences can bring us together,

we are all different but somehow we are also related.

When I think of my dreams. I suppose career wise, I want to work in the UN. I think this is because I feel that working there will be the best avenue for me to achieve my human rights goals, and a place where I will have the best opportunity to make a difference in the world. I think my hope, in general, is to have a world where people go beyond race, gender and class. I know we are never going to have the perfect world. It is not perfection that I am looking for, but instead to move in this direction, to move towards it. I see a world where the first thing people know is the person, not the difference, that they do not judge a person because of their difference. I imagine it like an envelope. Like once people get to know the inside, they forget about the outside. To have a world where people look inside, where people understand: to move beyond everything else and focus on the real essence of a person. I believe this is achievable. I am a realist! So in five years time I see myself working, obviously, and maybe married, actually, no, not married, engaged. And to be looking forward to my life of making a difference. I don't know where exactly I will be working, if it will be more political or human rights based. Right now I am still working that out. But overall, I want to be making a difference, and I want to be out there, outside, not just making a difference on paper, from an office or something. **I want to bring my words, what I write and what I say into action, translate them into action. I will be using all the tools, skills and education I have to achieve my goals.**

**“Whatever lies ahead I will continue to educate myself”  
Heather**

I have been in Ireland for seven years. I left South Africa for many reasons... to find safety, to escape abuse. I had to go. When I think back, leaving South Africa, the journey, it wasn't so bad, but arriving in Ireland, it was so complicated. It was not like what I was told. I was briefed on what it would be like. But it wasn't like that at all. It wasn't like what I was told. The asylum process and all that was not what they said it would be like. They told me that when I arrive in Ireland, there would be people that would inform me of what I need to know. They said that there was a place that I would be taken to and taken care of; it was not described like a hostel, like how it really is, or what these hostels are actually like to live in. The reality was something totally different to what I was told. I was never told that I would be staying in the hostel for so many years. I was never told this. Seven years later I am still there, and every day I wonder of the possibility of getting out. There is nothing for certain, but I just keep praying.

*“Right now I am really taking steps, I am not  
lying back, or afraid to make a move”.*

When I think back to South Africa, to my home, I suppose I think of my family, my mum. My dad passed away. I left my mum there, in the family compound; she is still there with the family. I was supposed to get married to somebody there, against my will, so I had to leave South Africa, leave her. I would like to be with her, but as long as she is in the family compound I cannot go back. Back there, I would be living with a family I do not get along with, and being a woman, it would not be easy. And I have found some peace and happiness. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that here women have basic rights, you can speak up. But back home, that is not the case. For a woman to speak up at home, it depends on certain factors, such as her financial standing and social status. As a woman, you need some other power, not just you; you as a woman are not enough. You cannot just stand up and speak. You need some other power. So it is better here in that way.

But when I first arrived in Dublin, I cannot say my initial reactions were

good. I was placed in a hostel in Gardiner Street, I was sharing a room. There were so many people in the hostel and all residents have to be wake up at a certain time to get food. If you miss food at the time you must share with someone else, you cannot get it later. It was a very strange experience. However, I believe that part of why my initial experiences and feelings were so terrible was because I knew no one, I had no family or friends in Ireland. It was hard to make friends, to get to know people. When I got to Ireland I realised that as a migrant woman I ultimately was not allowed to do anything. I was really being locked up for so many years.

But then 2011 came, and I said to myself, I have to stand up and do something. I cannot sit back like this. But that is not to say it was easy, that I felt like this and just went out and made friends straight away. It was not, and sometimes it still is not easy to mix. When you are separated from people and from parts of society for so many years, you lose your self-confidence. And your dreams are just shattered.

*“Here in Ireland, there is more peace, in the sense that I am not being abused, so it is much better”.*

However, I am happy to say that. Religion is very important to me, and this has helped to broaden my social circle. I went to my church, met people and started to socialise with them. And then I managed to do some courses, this also allowed me to meet people. And most recently, I have been able to pursue my modeling, something which I was doing at home and is my passion. So all of these things have helped me meet people and develop myself and my life here in Ireland.

But then again, the thing is, it was not someone else helping me really, or encouraging me, it was me, by myself. And I think that is part of a much wider problem. In particular, looking at my children has really helped me. I started to think that if I do not stand up, if I let the system hold me back, and keep me locked in, what future can I provide for them? And what, if I do not stand up, what will I achieve in my life? Above all, I was not a happy person. And I wanted to be happy. I realised that if I do something, if I stand up, and even just keep myself busy, I will be happier, I will be able to forget about everything, and now I feel less isolated and restricted. This has really helped me. With my children growing, and starting school, I knew I could not keep

myself locked in anymore, it would affect them just as much as it would affect me. I realised I needed to get out. It was up to me to introduce them to society.

*“I realised that I have to stand up, and I managed to do that”.*

So I suppose in a way I was forced to come out. But it was good. And what I found was, that people’s negative attitudes to those who are different is because they do not know who you are, they don’t understand that some people may behave a bit differently to others, or have different beliefs, but that that’s ok. But I think once you get to know those who are different, if you give them some time, your opinion changes for the good. And my church here has helped me realise this, it has helped me face the world.

AkiDwA has also been so important in my integration into Irish society, and in helping me pursue my dreams. I was introduced to the network by a friend. I went to one of their meetings and I heard of something about modeling, about a show, or class, a hotel was holding an event to do with modeling for International Women’s Day I think. So I went to the event, I really wanted to be involved. But once I arrived, my confidence left me, I couldn’t go ahead with it. But thank God, I got talking to one of the staff at AkiDwA. I told her about my passion for modeling. And she introduced to me to a woman who was offering classes. And it has been onwards and upwards since then. So I am so thankful to AkiDwA, It has been great and has inspired me and so many other people. I can see many migrant women that do not know about it, they are trapped, they cannot get out, they are hopeless and alone.

**It has not only been AkiDwA that has helped me though, when I got the confidence to go out and do something I went to do a communications course, and my teacher, she was so good.** She really helped me a lot. She was the one who told me I can do it, that I have to try. She was the first person in Ireland that told me this. And because of this, and her, I have learned so much. I thought I would not, or could not learn anything. But I did. And she was there to encourage me all the way. She, like others at AkiDwA, told me to stand up and do something. To be honest, my teacher and AkiDwA have been so important to me, especially since being moved from Dublin to Drogheda. I found that in Drogheda, many people do not just judge you











about who you are, but they judge you over what you look like, your colour. And I did not know how to handle this, what to do about it. I believe that to judge somebody you have to know them, only when you actually know a person can you judge them. But in Drogheda, I felt that people were not well introduced to foreigners, they did not know how to act around them, towards us. It was something new for them I suppose, to have us around, and for them I don't think this was easy. But because of this I went through a really rough time, you end up just continually locking yourself in because you are not accepted; you are constantly judged, treated differently.

*“AkiDwA has also been so important in my integration into Irish society, and in helping me pursue my dreams”.*

But, things have gotten better. I truly believe that things are changing in Ireland, for the better. I think believing this is crucial. I think it will help bring about a more ideal Ireland. I mean now, I feel our children in school are much more welcome than they were, they are mixing. So I see it, an ideal Ireland. I really hope that things will be ok for them, that things will be better. As they are growing, the Ireland they call their home is becoming a better place. I do not think there will be such discrimination. Children that come from all countries and religions are growing up together, learning together and there won't be a 'difference'. It will be normal. I want and hope that it will be perfect for our children. And for those who come today and those that will come in the future.

As Ireland is changing, I see my future more positively. Right now, my true ambition would be to enter full-time into the modeling industry, but I am kind of limited at the moment, with my children and my commitment to them. But I know if I did have the opportunity I would succeed, and it would be great. **In five years time I believe that my life will be different from what it is now**, it will be much better. Because **right now I am really taking steps, I am not lying back, or afraid to make a move**. I am keeping busy, occupied, avoiding the situation where I will be kept in one place. So I am trying to take as much as I can, to educate myself in so many ways, and try to achieve my goals. I have sat down for a long time. I have had enough of this. It was now time.

**I do not know what exactly I am waiting for or what lies ahead but I do know that I am going to continue to educate myself, take all the courses I can.** This way I will avoid being down and depressed about my situation while awaiting my status. To sit down and do nothing will not help. So in five years time, I want to be in a position where I am given the opportunity to show who I am. It does not matter what status they give me. I believe my dreams and aspirations will help bring about a more ideal Ireland. Just having dreams and goals means I have hope, and once there is hope I think improvement and positive change will continue.

*“Just having dreams and goals means I have hope”.*

If I could change something about Ireland, among a few other things, I would change the immigration system. Keeping people in such environments, like the hostels, for such long periods of time, is really damaging. It can be so serious as to cause mental illness, depression, fear and anxiety. As for me, I was lucky in that it did not get to this degree, but I did completely lose my self-confidence. For a time, everywhere I went I was told I should not be there, I was not allowed. You begin to feel it is easier not to go out, so you stay in, in these damaging environments. You have no freedom. It damaged me emotionally. So if the system could change, so people are not left to feel like this. I think the reality of this situation needs to be revealed also. People need to know the reality of seeking asylum, of the whole process. It is the only way. Most people do not know why we came or why we wish to stay. And in some ways, maybe we cannot blame them. But I believe if you come close, if you get to know the information, that things will be easier, not just for migrants, but for everyone.

## **“I have gained the ability and freedom to contribute”**

**Julia**

I have been in Ireland for four years, I arrived in 2008 when I was sixteen years old. I had problems in my country, and these were reasons for my coming to Ireland. I lost my parents some time ago, so I came alone. It was very lonely and hard in many ways. First of all in terms of communication, I did not know how to speak English as I come from a French speaking country.

I had to leave my country, I had lost my parents, I was being abused and my life was in danger. To describe it, I suppose it was like I did not have a life. I was just thinking all the time, am I going to die? I could not even go to school, I couldn't do anything.

*“So coming over here, I didn't just gain hope, but also the ability and freedom to contribute”.*

When I thought about what it would be like in Ireland, all I could really think was that it would be better. That I would have a life, because where I was, I did not have one. All I thought about was whether I was going to die. I was made to feel like I was nothing, that I could not do anything with my life. Eventually though I arrived here, and I suddenly felt I had hope, I started school, and I learned English. I was so lost without it. For the first few weeks, months, even though I didn't know English and I was lonely, scared of everything new and different, I felt ok and happier like. My happy face I had forgotten existed was coming back. It was so hard before, even if I tell you, I believe it would be so hard for you to understand. When I just think about my past, and all that stuff that went on, I do not want to experience that anymore. And so when I came here, the people that looked after me initially because I was under age, pushed me to make friends, to learn English. I went to school. All these things gave me hope. I felt important. Like I was contributing in society, in life, I felt like I had an association, or something. And when I went to school, I was so happy, like “oh, I am in school!”

I started school in 4th year, where I mostly just learned English. Most of us who were in that class didn't know English. After that I moved to a different secondary school and I did my fifth and sixth years there, and my Leaving Cert. I liked school, there were a lot of people, a mix, all from different countries, and I liked this. There were others that didn't have English, or much

English, and some that could speak French, which meant I could talk to them if I was struggling with English. What was especially helpful, and I think what made my experience of school much better, were the people who worked with a programme, one that provided homework help, mostly with English language skills. I would go there after school and it really helped me with to do better with English and in school in general.

Since I have come I have been making friends with organisations like Crosscare, and AkiDWA have helped me here, and also my Church. With these people I can shared my stories, they can share with me. We can talk together as friends, share our life. Learning English has been so crucial for this because we all come from so many different places. While I do have Irish friends, and I get on with them well, I have felt like I connect better with people who have had similar experiences to me.

After a few years being here I was moved to a hostel. I really didn't like the hostel. There you could not do anything. You could not cook. The kitchen, from certain times, was closed, it was only open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It was hard. And it was not a nice environment. There was a lack of privacy; it was not good for me. But now, thankfully, I am in an apartment. Crosscare helped me, I am living with other girls that are in a similar situation to me. It is better in the apartment.

*“The best thing about Ireland for me is the life I have now. I can talk, I am able to talk. So I have voice here, or more of one”.*

Last year I went to Marino College to do my pre-nursing course. This year I decided to take a year out to do some volunteering and gain some experience because we cannot work and get paid. So I am working with kids and I think I am going to apply to work with old people too. At the moment, **my main ambition in life is to help people.** *This is my dream.* But I also really want to do nursing. I suppose they are related. This year though, volunteering and studying is what is best for me, just to give me that extra help and time. After this I will finish the pre-nursing and do much better.

So **in five years time, I see myself in a hospital as a nurse of course!** Working with my patients every day. I will be there! For me, it is important to believe that my dreams and ambitions will bring about a better Ireland.

My dream is basically to be able to contribute to the society like most people can, to work. And I will be helping people of all different backgrounds, social, economic and from different ethnicities. There are so many different people with different backgrounds living in Ireland, and I want to be part of this, making a difference. Living in an Ireland where my dream was a reality

*“In five years’ time, I see myself in a hospital as a nurse of course”.*

would be the “ideal” Ireland. But for this to happen there needs to be change soon. Right now, people in the asylum process cannot work, we cannot pay tax, it is not because we want it that way, it is because the law does not allow us.

And in the hostels we are nothing. I also think some attitudes need to change. There is still racism, not from everyone, but from some. It is worse in some areas, there are certain places I do not go anymore because they are just too risky. Other places are a lot better though, people are nice, they smile. But I always try not to let the bad behavior affect me. I tell myself I am ok. And, I did not choose my colour. And I am proud to be what I am, who I am. **When I have bad experiences of racism or something, I try to think of all the people here that have helped me, and I feel better.** Like my class teacher in school, she was so nice. I am still in contact with her. And I was in the Big Sister/Big Brother programme, my Big Sister was brilliant, she is brilliant, we also still have contact, even though the programme is finished. We can talk when I want to, she is always there for me. So if I am feeling depressed I can call her. It is really nice, and so helpful to me. Sometimes you just need someone to talk to, someone you can trust.

The best thing about Ireland for me is the life I have now. I can talk, I am able to talk. So I have a voice here, or more of one. At home, it was difficult for me. At home I didn’t have a voice. I was not allowed. But now, Irish people have helped me, and are continuing to help me. Being able to tell my story here is giving me a voice. And certain organisations have supported me so much. The Irish Rape Crisis Centre has really helped me. Before them, I think I could not say anything. I couldn’t say no. And that is not because I didn’t want to, but it was because, I felt there was something holding me back. I suppose I was told I couldn’t. That I must say yes to everything, even

*“My main ambition in life is to help people. This is my dream”.*

if it was bad, even if I didn't want to do whatever it was. But my opinion didn't matter there. I wasn't free. And now, here, I can say no. I can do things. have the right to say no and it is so good. It makes me feel a sense of importance, like I have rights. It was so hard to come out of being so depressed, so down. But now, I am freer, I am better.

*“When I have bad experiences of racism or something,  
I try to think of all the people here that have helped me,  
and I feel better”.*

## **I want to be Minister for Education or Finance** **Betty**

I have been here five years, I came when I was sixteen. I came from Somalia but went to Yemen first. However, there was war in Yemen also, so I could not stay there either. Then I came to Ireland.

I had an idea of what Ireland was going to be like; I thought everything was going to be perfect and fine. And then I came here, I experienced difficulties- it is not the same as what you think. It is true that there is war in Somalia and Yemen, and that there is no war in Ireland. Nevertheless, it is still so different, it is still hard, especially when you are on your own, when you have no family here. So my initial experiences were difficult. Everything is so new and different, I did not expect that. The people before tell you that everything will be fine, and so you imagine that, but there are so many things, everything is not the same as what you were told, and things do not happen the same way. So you have a description of some kind, but then you have the reality. So it was a shock. For me, it was a shock. I was depressed for three years. But now, I am better. I started to act. It is getting better. Not because the situation is better but inside myself, I am getting better.

*“I pushed myself to do something positive,  
so I could forget the bad, and feel better”.*

Learning English, going to school was important for this. I did my Junior Cert, then Leaving Cert, and now I'm doing a college course. Education opened the doors to meeting people, because I had no one. Like there were the girls in the hostel, and they were from the same country and we could all speak the same language, but they were the only ones I knew, that I could talk with for some time. But then with school, there were others, different people, from Ireland and different countries. So my group of friends is mixed now, which if I am honest, is much better. I feel that when you only mix with a lot of people from your own country, sometimes it makes things tougher. In the hostel, sometimes the women there, those that are older, or have been here a long time, or did not go through what you did, they take you differ-



ently. Like for me, they knew I did not have a family, so they treated me differently. I do not like that, things like that made me want to mix more with others, other nationalities, in different environments.

One thing I really struggled with at the beginning was how everywhere you go, when you are a migrant person, you get disappointed. So you have come from a place where there are many problems, difficulties, memories, all of these that you want to forget, like for once in life. So you think being in a new place away from these bad things will basically help you to forget them. **So for me I wanted to do something positive, to let me forget the bad.** But then for a time, everywhere I went I got negativity, everywhere the door is being shut, and when you end up in that situation, it is like you just start feeling that you are nothing, and they tell you that you are nothing.

*“So for me I wanted to do something positive,  
to let me forget the bad”.*

To get over this I pushed myself to do something positive, so I could forget the bad, and feel better. For me, getting a job, working, was not an option. I cannot work, I am not allowed to. So it is education. I did my Leaving Cert here, and I did want to enter third level, but at the same time it was the only thing I could do. Not being able to work and so many other things, is an example of how they are keeping you in a little bubble, they make you limited in your little bubble, they hold you back, like you become a disadvantaged person, they push you to be a disadvantaged person.

A lot of girls here, those from my country that have been in the hostel too, because they are not allowed to work, or feel like they cannot succeed with education, they marry someone. That is their answer. To move on, to have something because they are not allowed do anything, they are just hopeless. So this gives them something, it is like a step, because every other door is shut. And I mean this can also be the situation in their home country, but even more so here. They get married, they have children and even in time, after many years, they get their status, they are older then, they have been here so long, when they came they were younger maybe with the energy to do things, but instead they were kept sitting down, constantly feeling limited. They get married because there is nothing else, they have children. And I am not saying marriage and children are bad, but it means these girls

have missed opportunities. They were not able to think further ahead, they didn't see any other options; they get caught in a moment of hopelessness and need something. And so, that happens now, most of them, like they are married, have children, and they continue their lives in the same limited way, they don't have the chance to work, or the encouragement to get education, and I think that even if some opportunity was possible they wouldn't see it, as at this point, it would be too late. They have gotten into a negative mind frame, they have become trapped, and they haven't been given other options.

*“I feel that being involved in an organisation, especially one like AkiDwA, is empowering me”.*

So for me, it was really tough not to fall into that, to that life, that way of thinking, especially when every door always seems closed. But I knew I did not want this. I didn't want to sit back. I knew I couldn't. It was so hard not to be pulled in, away from this goal, because it feels like everyone else is moving fighting, but not really knowing what I am fighting for, because you do not really know what will be allowed. It is a lot of hopelessness. But I kept fighting, I persisted through. For me it was really hard not to do anything. Especially when you are alone. You need something. It is different when you have a family with you. But when you are alone and depressed, it is really tough if I am to be honest.

Overall then, focusing on my education, succeeding with it, this is what keeps me going. So right now, in my life, my ambition is to finish my education and be working. I want to be doing something, working in something that is making a change not just for migrant women, or women, but everyone. There is change needed everywhere. Recognising this need for change and having it as an ambition of mine is one of the reasons I joined AkiDwA. They try to push you to do something, and they do not tell you to be a disadvantaged person. Because I have found with some organisations, that is all they do, they tell you this in a sort of indirect way. But AkiDwA doesn't. They tell me I can do it, so from the minute I got involved with them I felt like this is an organisation I can stay with. And with that, you feel like you are alive. Because the system just wants you to sit down, to sleep, to eat, to

sit. But what you actually feel like in this situation is that you are dead. I feel that some other people, mostly those that are not migrants, might think you are lucky in this situation, like you do not have to work, study, they look at you and say 'oh its easy, you are relaxed' or something. But that is not it, all these things, they kill you. You are alive, but you are dead in another way.

I feel that being involved in an organisation, especially one like AkiDwA, is empowering me. It is encouraging me to stand up. And I am the type of person who likes to try everything, and I have some ideas. But before, when I went to some places, or even when you talk to some people, all I got was that I could not try things, I could not voice my ideas, they try to bury you, ignore you. But then with AkiDwA, they don't, they say the opposite, you know, bring it on! So that's really cool, really nice. **So in five years time I see myself doing great things!** But I am sometimes scared of myself, I am scared I may fall back into feeling depressed. But then I think, now, in my situation, I am much stronger, I have come a long way. And I think having people around me, that support me, they will keep me from these bad days.

*"They tell me I can do something, not that I am in some way disadvantaged. They make me feel like I have a purpose".*

When I think about my dreams, I say to myself, 'you are crazy!!' Because **I want to be Minister of Education, or Finance.** Or if not that, to go to some other countries, volunteering. Or to open an organization, to help people. I want to help people. The situation I went through and the position I was in, I don't want anyone to go through that, I don't want anyone to experience what I did. The first steps to achieving these dreams are finishing my education, mixing with more people. At the beginning, the reality of being an asylum-seeker made me feel scared, not all the time but sometimes, scared to mix with other people. But now I feel more confident, I want to be more open. I want to be close to opportunities, to get involved. And to learn skills, new ones and also enhance the ones I already have. Many different things, from hobbies to real skills; to getting more experience. Instead of sitting down.

When I think about things I am proud of, I suppose I think of learning English. Like I went to school at home, but it was an Arabic school. So a different language, so different. Learning English has helped me so much, I'd

describe it as a skill, so crucial. Like when I came to Ireland, in the house I was staying first, there were others there from my country that had been in Ireland for two years but had no English. And I was like ‘what??’ ‘Is that going to be me?’ And there are people here ten years I know of that don’t have English, they stick to themselves and people from their own country like, they feel that they have enough English to go to the shop or the hospital. I think there are many reasons why they choose this, complex ones, it is not that they just don’t want to.

*“But for me, I knew I had to have English, I wanted to, I knew it would make my situation better”.*

But for me, I knew I had to have English, I wanted to, I knew it would make my situation better; enable me to communicate and mix well with other people. And of course, at first I was talking with hands and feet, but then it all starts to get easier. And it makes sense, like to be in a country long term and be able to speak the common language makes sense, like to not know the language would have been so weird for me. But I guess for some others it is not, I simply don’t know. Sometimes I think I might have a thing for learning languages, but at the end of the day, being here, I said to myself, how will I do things without English? And I am glad now, I can fill in an application and I can do my assignments. I don’t need other people to take my words. And this makes me happy.

For me where there aren’t always remarks made about certain people, certain groups, certain things about people, there’s always judgement, in a negative way, and I don’t think this is a good thing. And of course, one that has a better system generally, one that feels more accepting, that doesn’t work to shut you out, keep you down.

**If I was to inspire or encourage another migrant woman who was here and feeling kept down, shut out, I would tell her to try hard.** Like for me, religion was a big part. I think that if you are hopeless, and everywhere you go and everyone you talk to seem not to hear you, the doors are closed, what happens to you then is that you become depressed. You will decide that you don’t want to exist in this world, so if you want me to be 100% honest, for me it has been my religion that has helped me. But for others, they didn’t

have this part, they missed out on it, and they became hopeless. And in this situation you need help, and religion was this help for me. It was the only thing that kept me hopeful.

Other friends would say the same, even though they have different religions to me. But it doesn't just have to be religion that will help you, so I suppose I would tell the girl just to find something that will give her hope. To have faith, it doesn't matter the religion. And also, to get out there. To learn English. To try to avoid mixing with negative people. Because if you do, I think you find yourself in a constant state of worry, depression, when people are only telling you negative things. Like don't go there, they are racist, you can't do that, like you'll end up not going out. You feel like everything is bad out there, and already your situation is bad inside. Also, you have just arrived in a new place, and everything is different, the weather, the food, so that's just difficult in itself. And then if you only have negative people around you, it's not good.

*“I think an ideal and better Ireland would be one where everyone is not always judged”.*

Lastly, like I said already, try not to only stay around people who have had the same experiences as you, which is hard, but it is important. Like its fine yeah to socialise, be friends with those from the same background, but not all the time, not only. And I find sometimes the system here, and certain organisations, just want to keep you with the same group, and I don't think in the long term this works well. If you are already depressed because of the situation you are in, and so is the other person because they are in the same situation, then it is always negative. But when you have a mix, people from different backgrounds, situations, it helps. You see there are other options, you learn things, you gain more skills and confidence. It is one of the things that encouraged me to have different friends, from all different places, circumstances. So for you to escape the negativity, you need different people.

## **It is different, here I feel like I can dream big Carolina**

I have been in Ireland for four years. I came with my brother who is a year younger than me. We are together, but living in a hostel. We just moved to a new one though, and I think it is better than the one before. There were various reasons for us coming here, family reasons, life in Guinea, the situation there. It is so different to here, it is a hard and tough life, growing up there I don't think could be compared to what a childhood would be like here. In the country right now, I don't really know what is going on. I used to go on the internet and check, but now I don't. I think I want to be away from it. The last time I checked, there was still conflict. Between students and government and the people, the country, just struggling for opportunities, rights. And there was a lot of deaths. So I suppose my reasons for coming here were family issues, the conflict and the danger around us. But then again, there is conflict everywhere.

*“When I came here I had no hope. I didn't believe that there could be a great life in front of me. But now I see that there is”.*

I went to school back home, but I couldn't go very far, up until 9th/10th grade, after that, there were no financial means that would allow us continue. In school we had an English teacher, but learning the language didn't seem so important, no one was particularly interested. If it was the case that we knew we would finish school there and that there were options to go and work, you wouldn't use English, the language is French, so it almost felt that there was no need to learn it.

So when we arrived here, not only did we not know anyone, but people you meet, they are trying to talk to you, but you don't understand, you can't talk back to them, they might be trying to help you, but all you can do is look at them. So, all these things made it quite scary. I did meet some people that spoke French, but when I arrived here, I was a very reserved person. Because there were things in my country, things I went through, that made me less open. I mean I held everything back. So, I found it hard to open up even

to those who I could communicate with. People would try to have a conversation with me, to find out about me, my life, but it wasn't easy for me, to let people in. For them to know what has gone on in my life. So it was all scary. It was just something so new, so different. It's like you have to take baby steps. We also didn't know what was going to happen to us, we hadn't been sure the whole time, the entire journey. You felt like you were just in some hole, and everyone, the whole world, was looking at you. Scary, scary, scary, scary. We had no idea we would end up in Ireland, like the day or night before I think we found out that it was Ireland, it is so hard to remember now. But the original destination was France.

I think when I started going to school I finally started to open up a bit. I went into 4th year, and started to learn English. With this I could begin to talk to people, meet other people, open up a bit. **There were people from different nationalities, really friendly and interesting people, and being around people every day made me feel better, and then I'd say it was really last year that I opened up properly.** For all the time before, to be honest, I was still in here, inside myself. Like still scared.

When I was walking down the street for example, I still had the feeling like someone was going to grab hold of me. I think this fear stemmed from back home, I could also not trust people. I would ask myself, who can I talk to? Who can understand me? I just wondered if anyone could understand what I had been through; I wondered would they know how I was feeling without me speaking. So the fear, and not knowing who to trust, they were all things that made it take a while for me to really open up. So school, English, education, they all helped me, but my Church too, it has been so important to me. I suppose though also it was something inside me. I knew I had to open up. I knew deep down that if I didn't, it was going to eat me up, I was going to be the one that suffered. It is better to cure something when it's little than let it get bigger. I knew I had to be able to trust people. I had to sit down with young people like me, and talk, I had to open up, tell my stories. It wasn't easy but I knew my silence couldn't go on forever. I had to.

In relation to how I was feeling though, and opening up, what strikes me about the Irish people is how they are at same time open and reserved. Like I know everyone says the Irish are so friendly, and I feel like they are too, but I feel like there are many who don't show who they really are, or what

they actually think. I suppose that's the same with all people though. But then I think that maybe with the Irish people there are a lot of things that they don't know, and when you don't know you don't understand, and that can make them behave in some negative ways, especially to those who are not Irish. So in some ways this could have been another factor in making it hard for me to open up, to trust, not be so scared. It is almost like they just take one side sometimes, and then get stuck in this thinking, like stuck in a closet, but I feel like once they do know the real situation, what is really going on, their view will be different, and their behaviour more positive.

*“In my life now, I would describe myself as going upwards.  
I am not looking back”.*

The negative experiences that I have gone through, the behaviour that has been directed towards me as a migrant woman, I don't take it to heart. Like I could be angry, upset, and take this out on an Irish person, but that's not going to solve anything. Because I just think, if they are to judge the whole African nation based on that, on me, and on the negative way I have reacted towards them, that's not good, it isn't right, so I am not going to do that. Also, I don't want to be that person that always complains, because even if I have bad experiences with some Irish people, **I am so grateful for all the help I have had here.** For everything positive the people here have done for me. For my social worker, my friends, my school, for having a place to sleep. For everything. Things are much better for me now than they were when I first arrived. And anyway, if I am going to sit back and complain, where that will get me, and there are a lot of people in much worse circumstances than me.

In my life now, I would describe myself as going upwards. Yes. Upwards. I am not looking back. What has helped me get to this place I think is seeing young people like me, even younger, just doing great things for themselves. It amazes me. I love it so much. They are doing great with studies, working, achieving, just being up there. I mean seeing this as a reality, it has encouraged me, and I encourage it. I think this is such a fascination for me because of what it is like for young people back home, if I am to compare. Back there, it is not as easy. I mean, you can't dream that big. And I still don't know the reason for this really. But I know there is just this feeling, and I felt it, that



there is a certain point that you can't get beyond. You reach this point, and that's it.

So seeing people here, going up and beyond, it is amazing to me. It

*“But here, it is different. I feel like I can dream big”.*

makes me think, if she can do it at her age, so can I. It makes me get up and go. It just gives me a push. I think what also pushes me is embracing the fact of being a woman in Ireland, back home it is different. In Ireland, women have freedom, I feel like I can dream big. Yeah, there is freedom when you are a woman here. For example, you can say 'no'. There is freedom to do what you want, I mean go for what you want basically. Like you can't do that back home. Especially when you're a woman. You're restricted. It's like men do this, men do that. As a woman, you have so many restrictions. Here as women, there is the freedom to participate, to give back. There are so many things here that I can be involved with, organizations or community work. But back home, there isn't a lot, or even if there were, and a woman was to participate, there wouldn't be much importance given to it. So, the fact that as a woman I can dream. Before, I couldn't dream that much, you limited. Even if you do go to school, and you finish, it doesn't mean much because as a woman back home there is so little opportunity. But here, it is different. I feel like I can dream big. So in this mindset, in five years' time, I see myself with a masters, as I am currently doing my business degree, and I see myself as working maybe- actually- not even maybe, I will be working! And, I see myself doing great things, I want to do great things. I want to achieve, here in Ireland, and make a difference. I think for me what is an important thing is to be able to give back what I have received. I received a lot for free, to describe it in a way, I want to give it back in the same way. I know to achieve all these things I need to learn, a lot. I need to go wherever I can get the information and skills I need. And also to integrate into society and the community, definitely. I see this is the best way to achieving this goal- of giving back to society, of helping people who need support. Not only do I see it around me, with other people, but I feel it inside.

I think just knowing that there are people out there that have difficulties, ones that you have had, or not even but knowing regardless that there are things that you can do to help them, then why not help them? Why see the

person go down and down? I mean I had people pushing me to go up, and to help and support me, and if they can do that, and if I believe that I have the strength and capacity to do that too then I will do it. It will be an achievement for me.

I think my biggest dream at the moment is to set up a charity organization. I know that I am studying business but I think the skills I am learning in this course can only help me with this dream. And I don't only want this organization to be in Ireland, but internationally. I think though, on the more simple, lower down level, a big dream is to be able, capable. Like I said, you give back what you received. So like, when I came here, I had no hope. I felt like everything was just over. I didn't believe that there can be a great life in front of me. But now I see that there is. So I want to be able to carry that light to those that have no hope, those that feel they are living in darkness, trapped in, that kind of feeling. So that's one of my dreams: to leave my footprint on the world.

*“I want to be able to carry that light to those that have no hope, those that feel they are living in darkness, trapped in, that kind of feeling. So that's one of my dreams: to leave my footprint on the world”.*

Looking now, from the place I am in at this moment, if I were to meet another migrant woman who had just arrived in Ireland and was experiencing that feeling of hopelessness that I have described, I would tell her not to give up, or give in. For example, imagine that you are crying, you feel like you are no body, or that you are not able to this or that. If you believe that, it will happen. You won't be able. I would tell her to wipe away those tears, even though you are in pain, and it is hard, and even though I can't know exactly what she is going through, and that I can't say it will be easy, but just tell her to know that tomorrow is going to be a better day for you, think positively. And that is what will happen. You can't let what happened in the past determine your future, and you can't let the negativity that might surround you take over. Don't let those who want to make it difficult for you to win. In the end you have to face them. And think, I'm going to be great tomorrow.

I can say now that if someone had said this to me when I initially arrived

here, I would have listened yes, but I was not in a good place, at that moment, I could only think of the bad, focus on the negative. All you keep thinking is that this person doesn't know what has happened doesn't know what I have gone through. But despite this, hearing these words of encouragement are crucial no matter what. Even if you are thinking only of the bad, you need to hear things like this. So I would give these words of encouragement and try to lift her out of this dark place a little bit.

Currently in Ireland I feel there is sort of an air of negativity though, with the recession, lack of work and all. You hear a lot of people say only negative things about the country's situation. But as a migrant woman living here, I don't like to see it like this. I don't want to focus on the bad, I have had enough of that. I don't want to see Ireland just as down. Like things might not be so great now, but generally, as a migrant woman, I don't want to believe what some people say that there is nothing for us as a group to do, I believe there is always something to do. I don't feel that I want to get out of Ireland.. I don't want to see it like that because it means you stop being you. Once you say it you are making it real, and sometimes if you hear it all the time you start believing it. But I want to believe that I can do what I want to do. I don't want to stop myself in any way. Because I do see it sometimes, and not with all foreign or black people, but because they are told that they can't all the time, they think they can't. But I don't want to believe it. I won't. And maybe some people think I am nuts if they hear me saying this. But I don't care. You can't say there is nothing unless you try.

*“I don't want to believe that this is a country where an African, or a black person, cannot have opportunities in certain areas or certain parts of life”.*

When I think of the good things about Ireland, what comes to mind most quickly are the little things, like people saying hello to me, people I don't know. Like a hello from someone can just change your whole day. I think that warmth is a big thing, a good thing. And the fact that there are people here to help, there are really good people out there that have good hearts. Also the organizations and things that are providing help and support, it brings to light that Irish people are trying to find out what is going on, and I think, oh it's happening.

*“Talking about the things that have helped and inspired me here”.*

Also, being able to share my experience in this this publication is great. For example, some time ago there was this woman I met and I had to share my experience and everything, but this was the experience of my past, and it was hard, because sometimes I don't want to go back to those thoughts. I feel like going back there can be a barrier to me in what I want to do, where I want to go, to moving forward. Like it makes you feel down. But talking about the future, talking about what changed your life, people you have met, all different things, education, my dreams and goals, it is so much more positive, it's a good thing. And also, talking about the things that have helped and inspired me here. The organisations and people who have supported me to go to school, the PLC course that I am doing now, and basically any person or place that has provided me with support, that have believed in me, this is all good to talk about. And I am so grateful.

## **My ambition is to be working and be independent.**

**Ali**

It's a long story as to how I have ended up in Ireland, but mainly because my husband was in a minority religion in Iran and it was not accepted by government. For some time it wasn't so bad for him at home. He used to live in another city in Iran, near to his family but not in their town because he was recognized there, I mean it was known that he belonged to another religion and this was not accepted. We thought he was fine but then there was the presidential election in Iran, it was almost eight years ago, and he was involved so to speak. He put up a poster in his shop for the opposition group, and that's how we became in danger. Like he wasn't even involved, he just ran the shop, he was asked to put up the poster which he got some money for, his shop was in a good location so the group would be able to advertise their stance, but that is all he did.

*“The only way to get out of danger, was for us to leave Iran”.*

It was then our lives became in danger, he began being associated with this group, and then the fact that he wasn't Muslim, he had changed his religion, didn't help things. In Iran, if you change your religion from Islam to Christianity or anything else really, you have to be dead. In his religion they do not pray like Muslims, they do not fast. They have another holiday. They are completely different. And that is why they aren't recognized in Iran. The only way to get out of danger was for us to leave Iran. We did, and now we have been in Ireland for seven years.

Up until this time, I liked living in Iran, I never really had any problems. Even for the first two years of our marriage I never really had many problems- which is probably a bit unusual being a woman in Iran. But for me, I suppose I was kind of wrapped up, like in a cotton sock. I didn't have much of an idea of what was going on for a lot of women. I went from school, to university and then to work. I didn't have any problems. So I find that people ask this question about being a woman in Iran and I say I don't know. It didn't involve me. My family protected me so much, so I was lucky, the discrimination didn't really affect me. But that's not to say that I don't notice

how much more freedom women here have, like, for example, the freedom to do what you want. There is choice. For instance, you can go to the pub if you want. And there is also freedom generally, not just for women. Here, people can talk, they can discuss what's going on outside. In Iran, to speak about things like the president, or about what is happening, how things are difficult, it is not allowed. Like in a public space you couldn't discuss these things because you never know who could be close to you listening, telling my story like I am doing now in Ireland, couldn't happen in Iran. Even now I find myself wondering who is around, who could be listening. But then I remember, it's ok to talk here.

*“In Iran I was a nurse, I practiced for eight years. But here, I cannot be a nurse. Because you can't work as an asylum seeker”.*

When I initially arrived in Ireland it was hard, it was so long ago too. It's very hard when you come to a new place from somewhere totally different and you have no idea of what will happen to you, of what way things will go. I couldn't even speak English, I didn't understand anything. I missed my family, my country, everything. I immediately entered the asylum process. And with this, your life it becomes, well it becomes limited I suppose. Back in Iran I was a nurse, I went to university and then practiced as a nurse for eight years before coming to Ireland. But here, I cannot be a nurse. When I arrived I couldn't just apply for a job in a hospital. I was not allowed to work, asylum seekers are not allowed. Even now, that I have a status and I am out of the hostel, I would have to go back and study for another 4 years in order to practice as nurse here. This frustrates me, because all I want to do is work, but four years is a long time, and then there are the English tests you have to do. Everything is made so complicated, so difficult.

When I think of my initial experiences in Ireland I think of the hostel, that environment. Everything is so limited there. It's not a nice environment. I knew I had to force myself to be outside of it as much as possible. I knew that learning English would be crucial. But in the hostel there is nothing, there is no way for you to educate yourself, you have to go outside to really learn, for you to give yourself any chance. Because you can't work as an asylum seeker, the alternative is volunteering. And I took this as an opportunity to learn English. I started working in a place with children, looking after

them. I was watching the cartoons, reading children's books, and slowly I began to learn. I had to start somewhere. I couldn't just stay, stay inside the hostel. I didn't know how long I would be there, how long I would be in the asylum process, so I just had to get out and do something. And I am so thankful I did, because it was six and half years I spent in the hostel, that is a long time. I remember myself just thinking- ok, no one can really help me, after all it's up to the Department of Justice. No one but them will take me out of this hostel. So I pushed myself. I made the decision to work as a volunteer. I was depressed for some time, taking medication, but then I caught myself. I began asking myself how long would I be on these, what good will they do. I then put them all in the bin and I said I am not going to cope like this, I don't want to be like this, I didn't want people to feel sorry, or pity for me. So volunteering became my out. It wasn't easy at first but I persisted. It kept me busy too. And then my son was born, and this gave me a lot of hope, and motivation. I am now studying to become a Pharmacy Technician, so it is something that is still slightly related to the nursing field, but the study time isn't so long. And it's a new skill.

*"I always had hope".*

Although things were tough and I encountered my difficulties and dark days, I think I am lucky in many ways too, I am lucky that I found motivation, strength. I always had hope. Sometimes I think back to the hostel and to some people who were there, and how they were feeling. There are people who are out of life, I suppose I would describe it like that. Like, they weren't real people almost, so down, depressed, constantly nagging, negative. And I was like this some times. It is part of it, it's like the environment of the hostel, the situation of seeking asylum breeds this feeling. And these people, there is no one to listen to them, they have no one. And I did listen to them, talk to them, precisely for the reason that they really had no one else who would. And it is so easy to start thinking the same way, because you can relate to what they are saying, you are living the reality they are describing. But I forced myself not to think in this way, not to get into this state, to hold onto my sense of hope. I knew that I couldn't let it affect me or hold me back. I would listen to them and try to give them some of my hope.

I feel my hope and determination to find good in the bad allowed me to

*“I am happy. I am finally out of the hostel, I am just so happy to be out of that situation”.*

see what my ambitions are for my life here in Ireland. My ambition is to be working and be independent. Right now, this is something I want so much. For six and half years I haven't had this feeling, in the hostel you can't be independent. Once I finish my course I want to be working and watching my son grow, a happy child. That is my dream. I want to be able to provide for him, ensuring that he has the brightest future. I want a good future for my husband too. He is an engineer, but he hasn't been able to work for the past seven years. It's frustrating for me. But at the moment he is trying to get his English exam, and hopefully then get into a University to do his master's degree. We need to work hard if we want a better life. For us and our son.

*“Now my ambition is to be working and be independent”.*

I think to make it through this situation, of being an asylum seeker, the situation it places you in, you need to be strong. And this is so hard because it feels like everything around you is trying to knock that strength right out of you. This needs to be known, that you need to have strength. That you can't let the negative environment affect you, to bring you to an all-time low. It's not easy, but I think it is the only way. If you are not already a strong person, you have to learn to be one. Before coming here I wasn't that strong. I wouldn't have described myself as a strong person. But I became one.

Right now, as a migrant woman in Ireland, I am happy. I am finally out of the hostel, I am just so happy to be out of that situation.



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