



Documenting the Undocumented:

Experiences of undocumented migrants in Manchester

During the summer of 2015, Europe was said to be in the midst of a 'migrant crisis'. Various media outlets in the UK and elsewhere documented the journeys and arrival of thousands of people who had left their country of origin and in many cases, had risked their lives to try and reach Europe. The discourse offered by politicians and some of the media used dehumanising language to depict these migrants as a threat, something to be feared, and invoked military terms such as 'invasion' or referred to a 'swarm' coming to the UK. This belied the variations in experiences of those involved. The trend in depicting the situation in this way came to an abrupt halt upon the publication of photographs showing the lifeless body of a Syrian toddler, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach. This marked a turning point – at least for a time – in the coverage and discussion of undocumented migrants, with a more conciliatory approach adopted.

Whilst this coverage provided descriptions of the hazardous journeys undertaken to reach Europe, and depicted the arrival and movement of this group of migrants, there was little on the subsequent experiences of undocumented migrants. The media discussion was rarely from the point of view of those experiencing this. There was little recognition of the other routes to becoming an undocumented migrant, also known as an 'illegal immigrant', such as being trafficked into the country or having their legal status revoked after their arrival.

This collection draws together images that document the experiences of migrants without leave to remain in the UK, which formed part of a project exploring the experiences of being criminalised or victimised. Whilst migration may present new opportunities, life in the UK is not without its own challenges. This project set out to investigate what the lived reality is for undocumented migrants living in Manchester and the photographs included in this collection reflect the everyday experiences of life for those who participated in this project.

All of the photographs were taken by men and women who had been undocumented for at least six months and the images were used as stimuli in group or individual interviews. Some of the quotations from these interviews are included in this book. This work captures their aspirations, exclusions faced, the impact of being isolated and dealing with the immigration system, and the importance of having somewhere to feel safe and be amongst others who are supportive. Through the photos and interviews, we noticed how critical space, physical and psychological, can be and so this book is structured around this theme, to highlight the different dimensions to what daily life can be like as an undocumented migrant.

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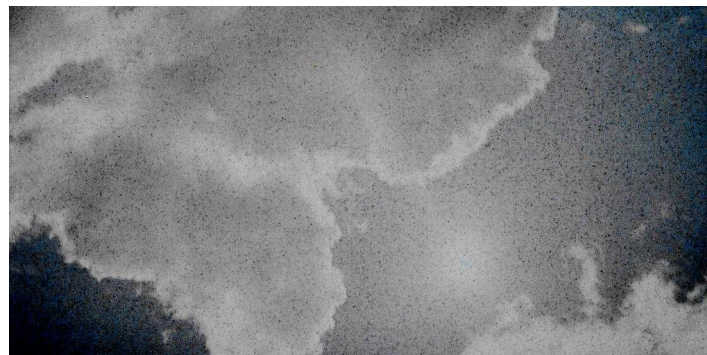
Changing Space

There were many reasons why those involved in the project decided to migrate and change their space – their 'pull' factors. There were clear themes of opportunity, aspiration and hope, for their future or for their children's futures, evident in the photographs and discussions. Central to this were the opportunities to improve education or gain better employment at a good company (such as the BBC). Relatedly, the family was also a key driver for migration (the subject of the two photos of children's bicycles, and a child's painting), whether it be to join other family members, to move their family from conflict or simply wanting to provide a better life. Several participants photographed the sky capturing the sun and clouds. These images represented their positive feelings of hope for their life in the UK, in addition to the clouds representing their negative experiences both in their country of origin and since they have left.

Some felt other connections with the UK. One of these connections was the significant role that Britain played in the history of their country of origin. This is a legacy of Britain's colonial past, where British connections and historical impact continue to be felt. It resonated with some of the photographers, including the young man who chose a photo of the British built dam in his home town, the importance of which was impressed upon him during his schooling prior to leaving Nigeria. The ubiquitous presence of the English premier league was also apparent, with several of our male participants citing this as a link to the UK and taking photos of the two stadia located in Manchester.



Changing Space



"You want a normal life. Success in my job and my study. That's it."



Regulated Space

Exclusion from spaces and from parts of society represented a significant theme in the photographs and accompanying narratives. The majority of participants took photographs of metal bars and others depicted this theme in other ways: a no entry sign and a space described as 'dangerous' (for example, the top image on page five). Being excluded, whether formally or in daily social life, was linked to being an undocumented migrant. This was verbalised by one participant who felt that "here, I am not wanted...I cannot fit in" and another who said "they treat me like a crime. This is the real crime. It's very hard". The restrictive nature of their daily lives, existing within a framework of rules and regulations, was also identified from the discussions and the photographs from several participants (for example, the 'health and safety law' poster photography on page eight). For those participants who were undocumented by virtue of failing the asylum process, they had no access to resources other than their Azure card, which tightly restricted the shops that they could use. This also excluded them from using public transport. This exclusion was further compounded by the negative and hostile treatment they would sometimes experience from shop staff and members of the public. For some of the respondents, these relatively small experiences of exclusion culminated in feelings of isolation and depression.



Regulated Space



Regulated Space



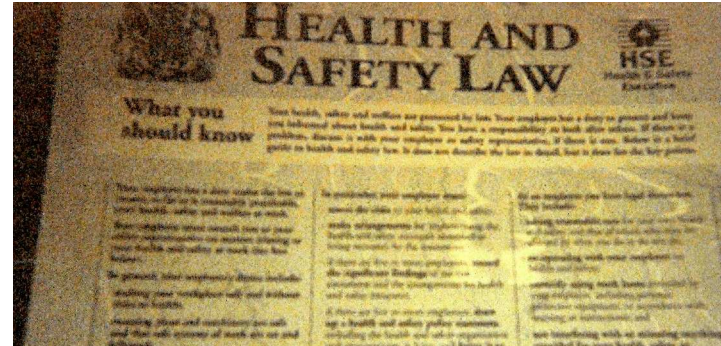
The treatment by sections of society was the focus of the images taken outside a local supermarket. The photographer described how the supermarket may care for some of their customers, whilst undocumented migrants like herself would not be counted as worth caring about, adding that they likely cared more for the cows and potatoes depicted in the advertisement. To add to this sense of alienation, this supermarket was a store that those with the Azure card were not permitted to use:

"Every week I dream of that card...I will be dreaming of it and panicking."

Regulated Space



Regulated Space



Many of the participants identified communication with loved ones in their countries of origin as very important. However, even this communication was viewed as regulated by the migrants in terms of how much phone contact cost and how often they could afford to speak to people that they love.

Regulated Space

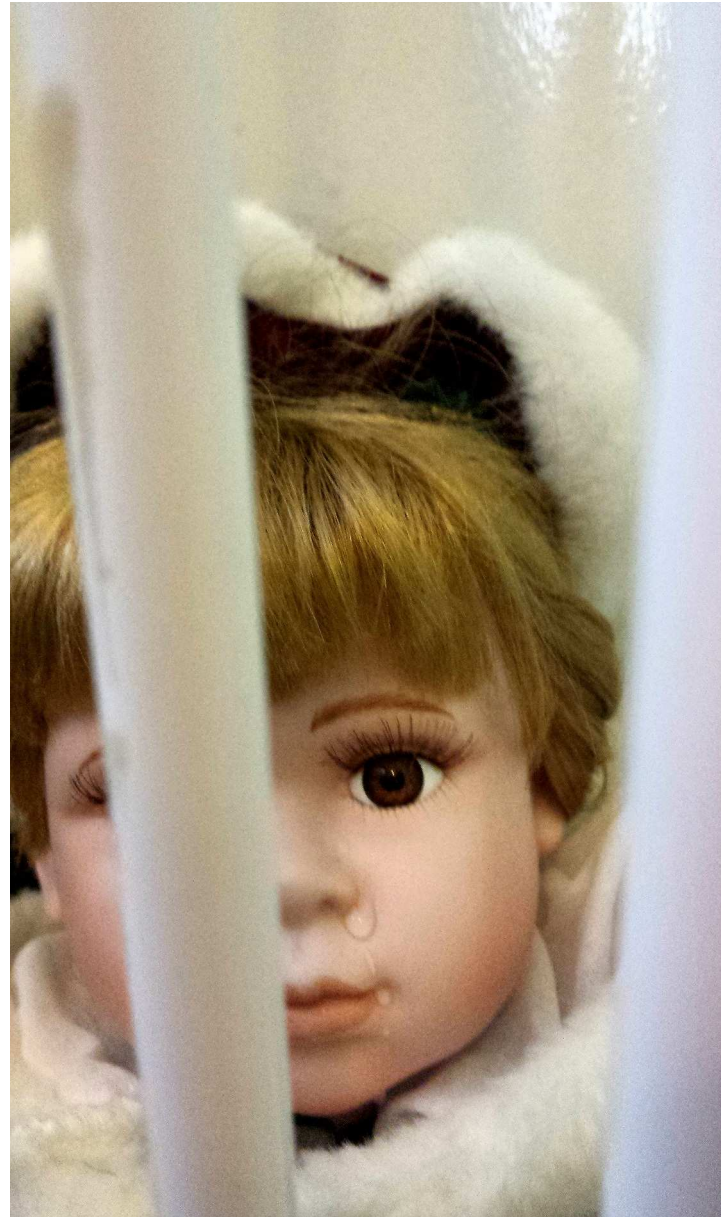


*"Why? Why do I have to live like this?
We have no choice."*

Exclusion from Space

Even when living in a diverse and large city, feelings of being alone and without support weighed heavily on many of the migrants. Some spoke of how they felt alone whilst being in the midst of the busy city centre crowds, surrounded by other people. This also made them feel vulnerable. Others represented this sense of isolation through images of deserted streets, where they could look far ahead but could see no one else, further accentuating the sense of loneliness and alienation. This isolation was expressed in a more stark fashion by some of the photographs. One noted the chalked words 'listen 2 me' at a small protest in the city, and felt some irony that those involved would be unlikely listen to someone in his position. The words, he felt, summed up his own frustration and sense of being trapped and unheard within the seemingly overwhelming and confusing immigration system. Like others, he felt excluded from the rest of society.

Existing within this system served to reinforce feelings of isolation for some, with one woman describing trying to navigate her way through the system as "just mentally torturing". Another photo demonstrates a physical split between two worlds – the busy street and the more peaceful green space - either side of a bus stop. For this photographer, the latter made her recall





happier times and gave her a sense of peace, whereas the grey street only served to remind her of her current isolation.

The impact of this isolation was substantial; controlling not only the support that was felt to be available but also having significant mental health implications. In cases where immigration applications were on-going or had been rejected and were being appealed, there was very little recourse to help and support, even in the most serious situations: "Even when you are attacked or you need assistance from the police, you can't because you fear that they're gonna ask you what's your status". Suicidal thoughts, feelings of being trapped, depression and desperation resulting from both past experiences and the current situation loomed large in the photos and in the accompanying interviews (as represented by the photo on the previous page of the 'imprisoned' doll shown to be 'crying'):

"I don't want to be struggling, feeling pain."



Exclusion from Space



Many respondents spoke of how scared they felt in their everyday lives; fearful of the authorities and of other people. Disclosures of being a victim of crime were made by several members of the group.

"I was living in fear"



This picture of the baby struggling to swim evoked a strong sense of anxiety for the photographer who wanted to help the child in the image. It was also reminiscent of her experiences of being lost in the seemingly incoherent immigration system, with those same feelings of anxiety and with no one to 'rescue' her either.

Exclusion from Space



"I have nothing, and I mean nothing."

Exclusion from Space



"I just feel really lonely here...Am I just unlucky?"

Exclusion from Space



Exclusion from Space



"I'm [a] victim here, and people use me."

Exclusion from Space





Safe Space

In contrast to the photographs in earlier sections representing negative feelings and experiences, all of the respondents recorded photographs of more positive spaces where they felt safe, physically as well as on a psychological level. This included literal feelings of safety, such as the space within the local library and at community centres where the participants attended various migrant support groups, as well as more ephemeral space where they took part in hobbies, like football, pool and creative pursuits. Important social networks were formed with other undocumented migrants, or with those who had once been in that position. These friendships and networks were highly valued amongst many of the respondents.

The images on this page depict a local allotment run by a support organisation where several of the respondents were able to visit, play a part in its running and take some of the produce home to eat. Several respondents highlighted the invaluable access to fresh food, given the limitations of the Azure card and problems they had experienced with food banks. The feelings of inclusion and the warm welcome they felt upon each visit should not be underplayed – both were of central importance to all of our participants.

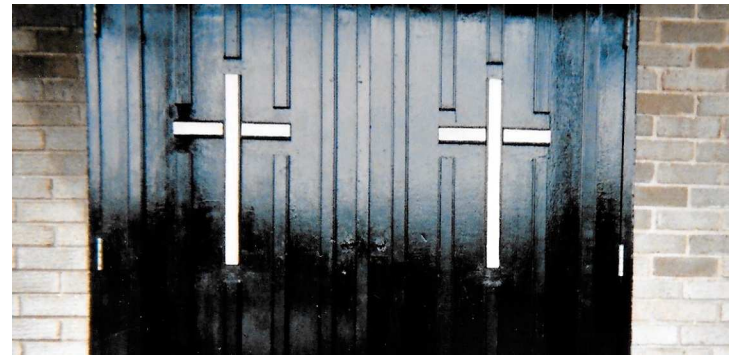


Safe Space

Many respondents took photographs of churches and talked about religion as part of their lives in the UK. Like with the allotment space, these respondents spoke of the importance of being welcomed into the church and being able to gain strength through their beliefs, which enabled them to cope with the daily challenges that they encountered. One respondent who had not previously engaged actively with religion had gone to the church in the hope that it would provide some comfort during difficult times. Community groups also use churches as meeting places so companionship, comfort, safety and a way to pass the time were all associated with religion by the respondents.



Safe Space



"I meet other girls...in church...and they quote the Bible. If they're feeling down...they go to this passage in the Bible and they quote it. And, you know, it comforts them, and it gives them empowerment....I'm still trying to get to that..."

Safe Space



The craft activities depicted in these photographs were seen as serving a number of purposes. They offered a social space in which to talk with others in similar situations and receive support. Making and then selling the greetings cards could also provide a way of helping to fund the support groups that were so valuable to the photographers. Having the ability to do this, in their lives that were so heavily controlled and restricted, offered some pride to the group. Pride was also felt by the group member who created a large swan out of the piles of official paperwork relating to her migration status. Whilst some kept this paperwork in suitcases, this participant chose to use it as materials for the craft activity that helped her cope with the stress caused by the very immigration system that produced so much bureaucracy. It offered her a small way of counteracting the system that denied her a voice and her power to resist or argue against it.

The activities were also a way of passing the time and provided a distraction during times of stress and uncertainty:

"Sometimes I'm forced to knit because I don't sleep that well...[I] start knitting to keep my mind off waking for a bit."



Safe Space



"When I'm stressed or cannot sleep at night, I can just wake up and start folding my papers and do something. It gives me a lot of joy and happiness."



Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the participants who not only took time out to become involved in photography training and interview sessions but also provided us with such powerful images and discussions about their experiences. They approached the project with good humour and a positive attitude and we are all grateful for their involvement. The project also benefited immensely from the support from Revive, who went out of their way to provide help and assistance for the duration of our work. We are grateful for the University of Manchester for funding this research as part of the Humanities Strategic Investment fund. Thanks also to Chris Charles for designing and running the photography training sessions and to Simon Ruding from TiPP for all of his work throughout the project and beyond!

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