



Just Stories

To be poor in a rich country like the UK is not the same as being poor in Africa. Poverty may be much less “in your face”, but let no one deceive you into believing that it is not therefore any less “real”. The words below are as true today as when they were spoken at the first National Poverty Hearing, 12 years ago in 1996:

“What is poverty? Poverty is a battle of invisibility, a lack of resources, exclusion, powerlessness... being blamed for society’s problems.”

Robin

Robin is a single male in his thirties. Bullying at school and then at work seem to have contributed to his ongoing mental ill-health, which has been difficult to overcome and Robin has not worked for the last 10 years. During one of his breakdowns Robin ran up debts for sheltered accommodation. The first he knew of this was when he was sent a note of arrears from the Mental Health Trust. He felt “crucified” by the debt which he eventually managed to pay off. Unable to work, he volunteers time regularly to various local organisations. He also receives a lot of moral support from his family and wider community. He would rather have this than their financial support, he says.

Sophia

“Sophia” has lived with her family in the UK for more than 20 years. With a disabled husband, her own mother and four children to look after (the eldest now at university), Sophia has three jobs. She works in a school as a cleaner and kitchen assistant between 5am and 7am and 11am and 2pm. She then works from 3.30pm to 5.30pm cleaning at a nursery, and from 5.35pm to 7.30pm cleaning at a community centre. As she herself said, “You do not get paid during school holidays, and you do not get paid if you are ill... If the government gave me a break, an opportunity to study or learn new skills, this might help me get a better paid job.” Her gross income, even when supplemented with child and working tax credit, is just £200.75 a week – and less in school holidays. Her weekly outgoings are £263.75, including just £130 a week for food, toiletries, travel and clothing (£18.57 a week each). The family has not been able to visit the rest of the family abroad for eight years. Holidays and outings to the cinema or a restaurant are out of the question. They cannot afford to buy new furniture or a computer. Sophia does not buy clothes for herself. “I have never bought a new coat, because if I buy something there will not be enough for the children and home.”

Laura

Laura is a single mother from Newcastle aged 34. She has one daughter aged 15, but no longer has any contact with her daughter's father.

"I work part-time in a newsagent for £5.35 an hour, but I'm paying £200 a month rent, so that uses up most of it. And all my gas and electric comes from the meters, which cost three times the usual rate, so by the end of the month I've got nothing left. I also get £17.45 a week child support, £43 a week child tax credit and £46 a week working tax credit. I know it sounds like a lot, but it isn't by the time everything has been paid for. Being paid monthly is also a problem – it would be easier to manage my money if I was paid weekly because I'm taxed weekly. I don't get any money from my daughter's father and I wouldn't want it anyway. I also volunteer here at the Cedarwood Project [a drop-in centre in North Shields] when I can, chatting to people, helping in the office – I've been doing it for years."

Maria

Maria is 54 and was a financial advisor in Bolivia, but came to the UK four years ago to improve her qualifications and her English. She works in London as a cleaner.

"When I arrived from Bolivia four years ago, I had some savings but the exchange rate was very bad and after a month they were all gone. I started working as a cleaner in the morning and studying in the afternoon, but this wasn't enough to live on, so I also started a job caring for the elderly in the evenings. At one stage I had to go to three jobs every day. Before 1 October 2006 (when the minimum wage was set at £5.35) I was on £5.05 an hour. I am now on £5.35 an hour, but I have never had a pay rise or been promoted in four years. I get up at 4am every day and will get maybe one afternoon off a week. Our employers say we are not entitled to holidays because we are part-time workers. I do not get paid on bank holidays or if I am ill. Sometimes I am very miserable, I have no social life and it can be very lonely. But I know the money I send home to my daughter is so important, and I hope that by the end of this year I will have enough money to start a part-time economics course."

Fiona

Fiona, a single mother, was working full-time when she met her first partner. After five years together Fiona got pregnant but her partner wasn't interested in the baby. She got severe post-natal depression and had to go off sick from work. Her partner also started drinking more and became abusive. Two years later she left him. Initially her ex-partner paid maintenance but after a while he gave up his job to avoid having to pay. After living in a relative's house for a while, Fiona moved into a council house of her own. Although still depressed, she juggled three low paid jobs while bringing up her daughter. She also started to get into debt. After nine years the depression got really bad again leading to another period off work. On returning to work she found what she thought would be a more stable job.

Meanwhile she met her second partner and became pregnant. Five months into the pregnancy she was unexpectedly made redundant, receiving no payment as she was classed as a temporary employee. Her partner also moved out, "frightened by the responsibility" of fatherhood. Being pregnant, her attempts to find another job failed. She went onto Income Support for the first time in her life – a situation she finds humiliating. Now the baby is one, she keeps her depression at bay by volunteering – a way of getting herself out of the house. She is keen to find work, but doesn't want to rush into a low paid job which may make the situation worse.

Simon

Simon, now in his late thirties, has worked hard since leaving school at the age of 16. He got married just over 10 years ago and after having two children he and his wife decided to buy the council house they were living in.

Within a few months, however, Simon was unexpectedly made redundant and was unable to find another job. He suffered depression and his wife also began to feel unwell. The situation was made worse by the increasing debt that Simon and his wife incurred in an attempt to maintain previous income levels. In turn, this caused arguments putting strain on the relationship.

The two children also have poor health, placing extra demands on the family. Although things are still a struggle Simon now feels the household has turned a corner. Social services provided advice on debt and they are now “taking stock” financially. Socially, they have found themselves relying on family, friends and church in various ways. Sure Start courses have also helped them to deal with the children’s learning disability.

Harris

Cheek by jowl with the City of London lives Harris, a university educated Geography teacher. He is highly articulate, speaks excellent English and is caring and generous. Yet he has no home and no money, and sleeps on the floor of a kind woman in a tower block in East London, and spends his days doing nothing. Harris is one of Britain’s new poor, a new underclass living absolutely destitute, for whom the welfare state offers nothing. Harris’ crime? He is also a “failed” asylum-seeker. A Zimbabwean, he fled imprisonment and torture in his home country. He would love to go home to help build a new Zimbabwe, but to do so at present would be to risk beatings and death. He can’t even get to meetings of exiles and supporters to discuss the political future of Zimbabwe, because he doesn’t have the money for bus fare. As one London MP said when she met Harris, “He can come to work in a school in my borough tomorrow. We are crying out for good teachers like him.” Yet if he took work, he would risk immediate imprisonment – or even deportation – as he would be breaking the law.

What is true for Harris is true for many other asylum-seekers - doctors, nurses, academics, journalists, engineers and electricians. They could all work; they all want to work. They could stop being a “drain on the state”, they could lift themselves out of poverty. Yet it is illegal for asylum-seekers to work. It doesn’t make any sense.

Jeanie

It was Jeanie Fox that changed my life,
changed the life of all of us, she did.
I'd given up long ago.
I hated the estate but I saw no way out.
I hated the graffiti and the vandalism
and the disgusting litter,
but most of all I hated the violence.
I was scared to go out after dark,
scared to open my door.
then one day this note came through my letter box,
I nearly threw it away, thinking it was junk.
But something made me read it.
It was a letter from Jeanie
inviting anyone who was interested in the estate
to come to a meeting.
I wouldn't have gone, but old Nellie next-door,
(she's in a wheelchair)
asked me to take her.
So I did, and that was the beginning.
It's taken a long time, it's true,
but we got there in the end,
all of us who cared, together. And now, thanks to Jeanie,
I feel safe at last,
we all do.
We like living here.

Just Church: facilitator sheet