

Child Migrant Stories – Voices Past and Present

26,000 unaccompanied children arrived in Europe in 2015, according to Save the Children. The EU's criminal intelligence agency maintains that 10,000 are missing, many feared to have fallen into the hands of traffickers. In recent weeks the fate of children in the 'Jungle' has come into focus particularly with demolition of parts of the makeshift refugee camp in Calais.

But behind these numbers lie thousands of children's individual stories. We know the fate of two of these children. Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian boy, drowned along with his brother and mother when their boat capsized en route to Greece. The image of Aylan's corpse washed up on a Turkish beach went viral and caused an international outrage – for a few hours, days or weeks perhaps.

And just before New Year 2016, Masud, from Afghanistan, suffocated in a lorry in his attempt to get across the Channel. He had a legitimate claim to join his sister in the UK but found the conditions in the 'Jungle' intolerable and took matters into his own hands. Things could have turned out differently. Last month British judges ordered 3 Syrian youths and accompanying adult be allowed to join their relatives in Britain and escape the 'living hell' of the Calais refugee camp.

But what of those children that do survive: that settle in the UK, across Europe or beyond? They are just starting out on life – wanting security, education, a future. What challenges will they face and perhaps overcome? What opportunities will open up, or be denied, to them?

For the past few years, as part of my collaborative PhD between Queen Mary University, London and the V&A Museum of Childhood I have been researching the experiences of children under 18 who have migrated to East London from 1930 to the present day.

I have interviewed 36 people (21 male and 15 female) from Turkey, Cyprus, Brazil, El Salvador, Poland, Italy, Southern Ireland, Vietnam, Jamaica, Antigua, Guinea, Nigeria, Rwanda, Yemen, Somalia, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The youngest was 5, at the time of the interview, and the oldest was 99.

The reasons for migration were numerous. Sometimes their parents came to the UK to study or to work but young people have also come independently to find employment. Often one or more parents went ahead leaving children, who joined them years later, in the care of extended family. Only 6 out of 36 children migrated with both their parents as a family unit. About half of the children have experienced war and conflict and 3 children came on their own. Their stories are poignant, powerful and often very funny.

With funding from the Centre for Public Engagement at Queen Mary University this rich resource of testimonies, photographs and drawings have now been incorporated into a website - [Child Migrant Stories](#) - Voices Past and Present. It has been developed in collaboration with child migrants some of whom are artists, musicians and film makers. The [website](#) includes an [introductory video](#) and [stories](#) of over 30 child migrants that come alive through sound, images and text. We will update the website with Films and Spotlight Stories on a regular basis.

We are also keen that this becomes a shared platform to collect new stories of child migration from within and beyond East London. This can be done through [Tell Your Story](#). We are also interested in exploring contemporary, pressing issues through the [Child Migrant Blog](#). Do let me know if you would like to contribute.

We would love you to share this website with others including through your own social media networks (retweets, new tweets, @mentions and so forth). Here are the links. Please click below, or if you're using a smartphone/tablet, then tap:

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I hope that the stories of children here, albeit who have migrated in different circumstances and at different times, can give us some insight into how better to support those children who arrive in our communities today.

Eithne Nightingale

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