



**Sarah Ezzat Mardini**

**Interviewed in Berlin on 18 October, 2015**

**Fled Damascus, Syria**

**Granted asylum in Berlin, Germany**

Sarah Ezzat Mardini was born in Damascus in 1995. From the age of five, she and her sister Yusra were trained by their father—a professional swimming coach—to be competitive swimmers. Both started swimming for the Syrian national swimming team at an early age. The highlight of Sarah’s athletic career came when she won a silver medal at a championship in Egypt at the age of twelve, after which she and other members of the national team were invited for a personal audience with Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria.

When war broke out in Syria, Sarah’s family lost their home, and her father was forced to take a job in Jordan, leaving his wife and three daughters behind in Damascus. Life grew increasingly difficult. As friends started to leave the country to seek safety and a better future, Sarah and Yusra gradually convinced their parents to allow them to risk the journey to Europe.

Flying from Syria to Turkey via Lebanon in August 2015, the sisters made contact with smugglers in Istanbul. The smugglers transported them from Istanbul to Izmir. After a wait of four days and a first failed attempt to make the crossing over the Aegean from Turkey to Greece, Sarah and Yusra were among a group of twenty people that the smugglers loaded onto a flimsy rubber dinghy (which was designed for eight passengers). Few within the group—which consisted of sixteen men, three young women and a baby—could swim. Within fifteen minutes, the motor had failed and the boat started to fill with water. As those on board started to pray feverishly, Sarah courageously jumped into the night sea and started to push the boat in the direction of Greece. Yusra and a handful of others joined her in the dark water. After three and a half hours of strenuous swimming, they had managed to guide the boat safely to the shore of Lesbos, saving twenty lives. In her interview, Sarah vividly describes the Aegean crossing, as well as the subsequent journey that the sisters made across Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria en route to Germany.

Sarah and Yusra arrived in Berlin in September 2015. Their parents and younger sister were able to join them in December 2015. The family has applied for asylum in Germany. Sarah is currently studying German and is a passionate member of the Refugee Club Impulse, a vibrant theater group that was established by refugees, consists of refugees and advocates for refugee rights. She spends much of her time on the island of Lesbos volunteering with ERCI (Emergency Response Centre International), a non-profit organisation that provides humanitarian aid to refugees arriving in Greece. Sarah is a proud Arab who resents the rich Arab countries for their poor treatment of Syrian refugees. She is an observant Muslim. She is opinionated and outspoken. She plans to study journalism (with a focus on human rights), and to return to Syria when it becomes safe to do so.

**Duration of Interview: 02:47:52**

The full interview can be viewed online at: <https://vimeo.com/candicebreitz/sarah>



**Farah Abdi Mohamed**

**Interviewed in Berlin on 18 October, 2015**

**Fled Somalia**

**Seeking asylum in Berlin, Germany**

Farah Abdi Mohamed was born in Somalia in 1988. His father was killed in tribal conflict while his mother was pregnant with him. Raised by a hardworking single parent in a conservative religious community, the expectation was that he would grow up to be a devout Muslim. As a young child, Farah made immense efforts to “find signs” that might confirm the existence of God. Unable to find such signs, and looking around himself—at the mess of tribal war, poverty and failed nationhood that characterized the Somalia of his childhood—Farah concluded that there could not be a God. His inability to find faith was accompanied by anxiety and fear. It became clear to him at an early age, that it was dangerous to express doubt. A confession of non-belief would, at best, have condemned him to a life of stigma and isolation. At worst, there was a high likelihood that members of his extended family would feel obliged to end his life to prevent him from poisoning the minds of others, within a community in which the death penalty is viewed as appropriate punishment for those who renounce their faith.

Searching online as a teenager, Farah came across words such as ‘atheist’ and ‘atheism,’ and was comforted by the discovery that there were others that had lost their faith or failed to find faith. As his English improved—largely via use of the Internet—a larger world grew visible to him. His voracious online reading was accompanied by exposure to television series such as *Lost*, *Survivor*, and *Grey’s Anatomy*, which piqued his curiosity about life beyond Somalia. When Farah could no longer stand having to feign religiosity and attend prayers five times a day back home in Somalia, he ran away to Egypt to study. Finding that conditions were not much better for atheists in Egypt, he gradually decided to risk the journey across the Mediterranean to Europe. On his first attempt to leave Cairo, he was captured and thrown into jail for seventeen days. Upon his release (thanks to the intervention of the UNHCR), he paid smugglers to board him onto a rickety fishing boat in Port Said, alongside 322 other refugees, braving a week-long journey across the ocean (for much of which there was insufficient water and food onboard) in a desperate bid to get to Germany.

Farah arrived in Berlin in September 2015 and is currently seeking asylum in Germany. He is enrolled and studying at Kiron (the ‘international university for refugees’). He is finally able to speak his mind freely within a new circle of friends. He nevertheless continues to fear for his life, given the conservative religious views that are prevalent within the Somali community in Berlin. As such, he chose to wear a disguise to conceal his identity for this interview, in which he speaks out publicly for the first time about having left the Islamic faith. Farah Abdi Mohamed is an assumed name.

**Duration of Interview: 03:32:19**

The full interview can be viewed online at: <https://vimeo.com/candicebreitz/farah>



**Shabeena Francis Saveri**

**Interviewed in New York City on 14 November, 2015**

**Fled Mumbai, India**

**Seeking asylum in New York, USA**

Shabeena Francis Saveri was born in Mumbai, a son to her Hindu mother and Catholic father. She soon realized that there was “a girl trapped inside her.” Intensely unhappy with her boyhood, she dreamt of growing up to live a “regular, mainstream life” as a woman.

As a child, Shabeena was intrigued by the local hijra community. By the time she was a teenager, she had joined the community and begun her own life as a hijra. Hijras define themselves as a third gender, neither men nor women. They have held a place within Indian culture for centuries (as recorded in epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata), and are believed to have powers to bless or curse others. Under British colonial rule, hijras were heavily stigmatized and ostracized from mainstream Indian society. Since then, they have had little access to social support (education, employment, healthcare) and virtually no legal protection. Furthermore, under a British colonial law that is still enforced, non-heterosexual sex remains illegal in India. Any sexual act that is considered “against the order of nature” is punishable by imprisonment. Internally, hijra communities are organized according to a strict hierarchy. Each hijra has a guru who expects full obedience, and who collects a large portion of the income generated by the hijras who are her disciples. Hijras typically earn their income by dancing at weddings and births, begging (which includes extorting money from people on the streets), and through sex work.

Frustrated with the many limitations imposed on hijras, and determined to live a more dignified life, Shabeena and a friend founded the non-profit ‘Dai Welfare Society’ in 1999, intent on fostering awareness and prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases within hijra communities. Soon after founding ‘Dai,’ however, Shabeena was subjected to blackmail and physical abuse within her own community, perpetrated by a hijra superior who attempted to gain access to the government funds that had been designated for the nonprofit. Increasingly aware of other possible ways of living her life (she had by now learned, via the Internet, about the existence of transgender identity in Western countries), Shabeena found it increasingly hard to tolerate the hierarchical nature of hijra life. Looking to lead a more independent life, and to escape stigma, Shabeena broke her ties with the hijra community and fled to Chennai. Against all odds, she decided to pursue an academic career. In 2013, she was awarded a Ph.D. for a dissertation that focused on the transgender movement in Tamil Nadu, India. She has since shared her groundbreaking research at conferences and symposia around the world.

The lack of legal protection and basic human rights for transgender people in India—and related threats of violence—prompted Shabeena’s decision to leave India. She arrived in New York City in June 2015, and is currently applying for political asylum in the United States. Today, Shabeena lives her life as a “regular, mainstream woman” and feels that she has completed her personal journey. She shares her full story openly for the first time in this interview.

**Duration of Interview: 03:38:49**

Shabeena Saveri has decided against having her interview online while her asylum application is being processed.



**Luis Ernesto Nava Molero**

**Interviewed in New York City on 13 November, 2015**

**Fled Caracas, Venezuela**

**Granted asylum in New York, USA.**

Born in 1960 in Maracaibo, Venezuela, Luis Ernesto Nava Molero was an effeminate child who was relentlessly bullied and taunted by other children, but also sexually abused by his stepfather, who stayed home with the kids while his young mother worked long shifts at the local Chinese restaurant to support the family. His fear of disappointing his deeply homophobic mother, as well as his own internalization of the homophobia that was perpetuated by the Catholic Church, ensured that he kept silent about the abuse. He was convinced that he deserved it. His stepfather did not accompany the family when Luis' mother decided to relocate herself to Caracas with the children to seek a better life, but Luis continued to be a victim of harassment in the capital city, where he was persistently at risk in what was an oppressively macho culture. A failed attempt to "become a straight person" by enrolling himself in a military academy eventually led him to the sanctuary of university life.

A promising, politically minded student (who looked to figures like Che Guevara and Fidel Castro as role models in the utopian early years following the Cuban Revolution), Luis soon won a scholarship to study in the Soviet Union. He arrived in Kyiv to study international economic relations as Mikhail Gorbachev was ascending to power, witnessing firsthand the growing disparities between the ideals of the Communist Party and the realities of Soviet life. He returned to Caracas in 1989, a few days prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, still a keen supporter of the theoretical potential of socialism.

Hugo Chávez's rise to power soon led to disillusionment, as Chávez's paramilitary regime rapidly became dictatorial and aggressive, often violently oppressing political opposition. Luis was offered a prestigious professorship at the Universidad Simón Bolívar. He continued to live his public and academic life very much in the closet, fearing the repercussions of coming out. Refusing to be silenced in his critique of Chávez, Luis was brutally assaulted by three men late one night as he left campus. The attack was intended to teach him a lesson for "being a mouthpiece of antipatriotic capitalist propaganda"—"Fuck your mother, Professor Nava—you little faggot—nobody needs you here."

Fearing for his safety, Luis fled to the United States, where he was granted asylum as a political dissident. Today Luis lives in New York, where he advocates for others seeking refuge and freedom in the United States, and works as an activist in the LGBT immigrant community.

**Duration of Interview: 03:49:58**

The full interview can be viewed online at: <https://vimeo.com/candicebreitz/luis>



**Mamy Maloba Langa**

**Interviewed in Cape Town on 12 December, 2015**

**Fled Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo  
Seeking asylum in Cape Town, South Africa**

Born in the village of Ntala in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mamy grew up in a family that spoke Lingala and French. Soon after her birth, the family relocated to Kinshasa, where Mamy was raised. When her father took a second wife during her teen years, Mamy's heartbroken mother left the family, abandoning her children to a stepmother who treated Mamy and her siblings with cruelty. At eighteen, Mamy could no longer tolerate the mistreatment and moved in with her husband-to-be, Foster.

Foster was making a comfortable living working as a trusted bodyguard to Jean-Pierre Bemba, the wealthy and charismatic leader of the political party that represented the strongest opposition to then President Joseph Kabila. During the heated run-up to the presidential election of 2006—an election in which Bemba and Kabila were the two frontrunners—Mamy's husband fled Kinshasa, leaving Mamy alone with her twin babies. It was common knowledge within political circles that Kabila would exact bloody revenge on the private militia of Bemba if he were to win the election, which he did. With her husband in hiding and out of contact, that revenge was instead brutally visited on Mamy. Seeking her husband, Kabila's thugs raided her house in the middle of the night. In the presence of her children and her young sister, Mamy was brutally tortured and abused by four men, to "send a message to her husband."

In dire condition and fearing for the lives of her children, Mamy fled to Lubumbashi, where she made contact with a smuggler who offered to get her out of the country illegally, though the destination of the journey was never made clear. After braving a suffocating five-day journey in the back of a truck, during which she was forced to physically silence her children, she found herself in Johannesburg. She managed to reunite with her husband in South Africa, thanks to the efforts of a friendly pastor, only to soon after be violently injured by a rampaging crowd during the xenophobic attacks that took place in Johannesburg in 2008. That experience prompted the family to move to Cape Town in 2009, where a few years of stability finally followed. In 2013, her husband Foster was shot in the face and killed during a nightshift at the Cape Town club where he was employed as a manager. No witnesses came forward to support Mamy's case, although the identity of the killer was well known within the community.

Today Mamy lives with her twins Fortune and Fortuna and her son Miracle in Cape Town. She must make the long journey across the country to Pretoria every three to six months to renew the documents that define her as an asylum-seeker. Nine years after her arrival in South Africa, the country has yet to grant her refugee status or to offer her asylum, although women who have been subject to sexual violence as an instrument of political vengeance or war are clearly eligible for asylum and support.

**Duration of Interview: 04:15:35**

Mamy Maloba Langa has decided against having her interview online while her asylum application is being processed.



**José Maria João**

**Interviewed in Cape Town on 13 December, 2015**

**Fled Angola**

**Granted refugee status first in Namibia, and then in South Africa**

José Maria João was born in an impoverished village in northern Angola in 1970, a few years before Angola achieved independence from Portugal. His childhood was embedded in the Angolan Civil War, during which MPLA and UNITA—two of the revolutionary movements that fought to topple the Portuguese colonial regime—jostled for political power over a period of twenty-seven years. José's family could not afford to educate him. From the age of ten, he was sent barefoot to the closest market every day (ten kilometers away from home), where he sold fruit to help support his family.

At the age of twelve or thirteen, he—along with many other young boys—was violently abducted from the market (those who resisted were killed), thrown in the back of a truck, and taken to a camp in the bush to join UNITA's rebel militia (a militia that sought to unseat the MPLA government via guerrilla warfare). On their second day in the camp, the children were each given an AK47, and by Day Two they were participating in frequent and bloody night assaults, the aim being to take MPLA villages for UNITA.

For more than a decade, José served as a soldier in captivity. Child soldiers were indoctrinated and stripped of their humanity. They were frequently made to witness and participate in savage killings of children who had rebelled or attempted escape. There was no possibility for contact with family or any reality beyond the bush camp. Following orders was the only way to survive. José's physical strength soon singled him out for special night training sessions, during which he was trained to embody fierce animal spirits so as to be able to lead troops ferociously into battle—"They change your mind, you start to forget that somebody gave birth to you. You feel like you were just born in the air and fell to earth. Your mind is not there anymore." José was both a witness to—and the perpetrator of—countless killings during his time with UNITA. Around 1994, he started to hear his mother's voice in dreams, dreams that would haunt him over several years ("Don't kill people, it's not good, killing people is not good, you will lose your life, you must leave..."), until he finally found the courage to flee the camp around 1997, late at night. He ran through the bush for five days to reach Namibia, burying his AK47 before he crossed the border.

Today, José is a much-loved bouncer at 'The Power & The Glory,' a trendy bar in Cape Town. He spends his downtime volunteering at a soup kitchen for homeless children. He sports a gold tooth (inspired by a Cuban soldier whom he met during the war), as well as a sizable tattoo of Nelson Mandela on his right bicep. Every morning at the crack of dawn, José climbs Table Mountain, which he regards both as his breakfast ritual and his source of inner peace.

**Duration of Interview: 03:27:57**

The full interview can be viewed online at: <https://vimeo.com/candicebreitz/jose>