Engaging Issues, 7 October 2025
Sami Gichki talk notes

Segments	Section 1
1	I still remember the smell of the waiting room. That mix of damp coats, cheap coffee, and nervous silence. We'd been in Manchester for a few months. I was ten. My mother sat holding a folder of documents like it contained our whole future because it did. Across from us, a sign said "Please take a number and wait to be called." I thought that's what life meant, waiting to be called.
2	That day summed up what asylum felt like. You wait. You're processed. You learn that other people decide what your life will be. There's a number for you, a file for you, a system for you but no face for you. For twelve years, my family stayed in that limbo. We were safe from the persecution we fled, but never secure. Every letter from the Home Office could change everything. We moved house seven times, but never truly arrived anywhere.
3	Growing up in that space, you learn to live in fragments. Friends come and go. Teachers ask why you don't apply for university, and you can't explain that your immigration status doesn't allow loans or work. You get good at smiling when people say, "You must be so grateful to be here." And you are grateful but gratitude alone doesn't build a future.
4	We lived on asylum support about £5 a day per person. No work, no savings, no sense of timeline. Just time stretching out like a queue that never moves. As a teenager, that uncertainty seeps in. I started struggling with depression and anxiety. I remember one winter night sitting on the floor, wondering if the world would notice if I disappeared. When you don't belong anywhere, your mind can convince you that you don't belong anywhere at all.
5	Eventually, a crisis took me to A&E. It wasn't planned or heroic it was survival. But that visit changed everything. Someone there didn't just see a refugee. They saw a person who needed help. They connected me to local support, to Manchester Mind, to community spaces that treated me like I had something to give, not just something to need.
6	That's how it began volunteering as a welcomer at Manchester

	Cathedral. At first, it was just something to do. But standing there greeting people, smiling, helping, being part of something, reminded me I still existed. It reminded me that belonging isn't permission someone gives you; it's something you build through action.
7	Soon I started volunteering elsewhere, as a benefits adviser, with veterans, then with young people. Each role gave me a new piece of myself back. I stopped seeing my life as "waiting to be called" and started calling myself forward.
8	People sometimes ask when my journey began. Was it the day we fled Pakistan? The day we arrived here? The day I got refugee status? But for me, it began in that waiting room, not because it was hopeful, but because it showed me what happens when systems forget humanity. And it taught me what happens when one act of care restores it.
9	That contrast ,between bureaucracy and belonging, became my lifelong question: What kind of country do we want to be? One that processes people, or one that invests in their potential?
10	Fifteen years later, I stand here as someone who's now a co-chair of a national youth movement, a trustee, a governor, a consultant, and yes, finally, a refugee with the right to call this place home. But none of that matters if we don't change the system for those still waiting.
11	Because every waiting room is full of potential. Behind every file number is someone who could rebuild a community, teach a child, start a business, write policy. And if we continue to build systems that only see risk instead of promise, we lose more than they do, we lose what makes us human.
12	So tonight, I want to take you on a journey, from that waiting room, through the asylum process, into leadership and reform, not just to tell my story, but to explore what works, what fails, and how we can transform the idea of belonging itself.
13	Because this isn't just about refugees. It's about how we treat people when they're at their most powerless. It's about what kind of society we become when we choose empathy over suspicion. And it's about the power of one small moment of humanity, to turn survival into contribution, and waiting into leadership.

14	That’s where my story begins, in Manchester, in a waiting room, in the quiet space between fear and hope. And that’s where this conversation starts.
	Section 2
15	When people hear the word asylum, they imagine safety. A door that opens, a country that says, “You’re welcome, you’re safe now.” But the truth is: asylum in the UK doesn’t start with safety. It starts with waiting.
16	For most of my life, our letters came from the Home Office. White envelopes with printed labels , never warm. Each one could bring hope or heartbreak. I saw them but never understood them, my mum always made sure we lived in a bubble, unaware of the challenges we were facing as a family. hovering between possible futures. I was ten when we first applied. I am twenty-two and finally a refugee. Twelve years of uncertainty, home office letters, appeal hearings, and legal aid letters that kept running out of hours.
17	The asylum process is designed to assess truth, but it often ends up testing endurance. It asks: How long can you survive uncertainty? Can you stay hopeful on £5 a day? Can you study when you can’t access a student loan? Can you build confidence while every part of the system quietly tells you that you don’t belong?
18	We were lucky enough to make Manchester home. A house that my mum did her best to make a home - something most like me dont have the privilege of getting. Though the fear that it wasn't really yours always stuck around
	What most people don’t see is the psychological cost. The asylum process doesn’t just ask for your story once. It asks you to repeat your trauma over and over — to strangers, in fluorescent rooms, through interpreters (for me i was asked to communicate through one that I didnt even understand) , while someone types it all down. If you cry, you’re emotional. If you don’t, you’re not credible. It’s an impossible performance.
19	There were times I thought, maybe I am the problem. When you live under constant scrutiny, you internalize it. You start auditing your own humanity, making sure you’re polite enough, grateful enough, quiet enough. But systems that measure worth by compliance will always miss the

	truth of who people are
20	And yet, there were moments of kindness that cut through. Teachers who helped look through scholarships. A neighbor who gave me 17 year old me a PC because i was too stuck on youtube watching gaming videos i didnt have. A therapist who understood that mental health mattered just as much as legal status and that they came hand in hand. Those small acts made survival possible.
21	That's why I always say: it's not one big act of cruelty that breaks people — it's the daily erosion of dignity. And it's not one big policy that heals people, it's the daily restoration of humanity.
22	When you grow up inside a system like that, you see how it shapes people's minds. Some become fearful, others numb. I became curious. I started asking: Why does the system create the very dependency it criticizes? If people were allowed to work, study, contribute, wouldn't that reduce costs and build integration naturally?
23	But the asylum process isn't designed for empowerment. It's designed for control. Control over information. Control over movement. Control over timelines. And when control replaces compassion, systems stop serving people and start managing them.
24	Yet even within that, you find resilience. Communities form under pressure. In Manchester, I saw people sharing SIM cards, clothes, food, advice. You see humanity reassert itself where the system has failed to. That's what gave me hope, watching people who had nothing still offer something.
25	If I had to describe asylum in one word, it wouldn't be refuge. It would be limbo. You're not where you were. You're not where you're going. You exist in the gap. And the gap becomes your teacher.
26	That limbo taught me patience, but it also taught me empathy, not the soft kind, the practical kind. The kind that understands how policy feels when it lands on a person's life. That's the part policymakers often miss: the emotional economics of bureaucracy. A delayed decision costs more than time , it costs identity, motivation, and mental health.
27	And yet, even after twelve years, we never gave up hope that this

	country would do right by us. That's the strange beauty of faith, not just religious faith, but faith in fairness, in people, in the idea that something better can exist. That kind of faith doesn't live in churches or mosques alone. It lives in ordinary people doing the right thing quietly.
28	Eventually, that faith was rewarded. After years, i was legally a refugee A pdf document in my emails finally said: You belong here. You are safe. But by then, I had learned something deeper, that belonging is not something the Home Office can give. It's something communities create when they choose welcome over fear.
29	So when I speak about asylum today, I don't speak as a victim of it, I speak as a witness to both its failures and its potential. Because the asylum system mirrors who we are as a nation. If it's broken, it's not just refugees who lose, it's our shared humanity.
30	What I hope people take from my story isn't pity. It's perspective. That systems designed for suspicion end up costing everyone more , financially, socially, spiritually. And systems built on trust can transform not just lives, but communities.
31	I began to rebuild after that, my mental health, volunteering, and purpose became my way out of despair, and that journey reshaped everything I now stand for.
	Section 3
32	When you live for years in uncertainty, something inside you starts to collapse quietly. For me, that collapse came in my late teens. I'd been fighting to stay positive, to keep studying, to help my family hold things together. But one night, the fight ran out. I remember sitting on the edge of my bed in the dark, feeling like my existence had shrunk to waiting. I didn't plan to survive that night. But somehow, I did. And the next morning, I felt ashamed, lost, tired. I felt like I had no choice but still alive and willing to give life another chance
33	That was the turning point. Because when you reach the point where you have nothing left, you also reach the point where you start to rebuild differently. The nurse that day didn't ask for my Home Office reference number. She asked how long I'd been feeling this way. And that was the first time in years anyone had asked about me, not my

	case. They referred me to local support, therapy and a few charities It was strange at first, speaking honestly again. But the thing about being seen is that it starts to make you visible to yourself. And visibility brings back agency.
34	I started volunteering every week. Then more. And more. First At Manchester Cathedral, I became a welcomer, greeting people at the door, helping visitors find their way around. I was a shy kid at first, sitting sorting the leaflets in the offices and disappearing every second i could get, but slowly it started feeling like a home. I remember standing in that huge, echoing space, watching people light candles, sit quietly, breathe. It reminded me how dignity can be restored in the smallest acts, a smile, a welcome, a space to pause.
35	My family comes from as Muslim background, but i wasn't ever religious. but standing there taught me something deeply spiritual: that sanctuary isn’t just a place of worship, it’s a posture. It’s the decision to make space for others, even when your own life feels uncertain.
36	From there, volunteering became a lifeline. I worked with a veterans’ charity, advising on benefits and housing. Later with youth groups, helping young people find their voice. And somewhere along the way, I stopped feeling like a case number and started feeling like a citizen-in-waiting. My mental health improved, not because my circumstances changed overnight, but because purpose gives structure to survival.
37	It was volunteering that taught me leadership — not the kind with titles or suits (no sometimes they come into the picture too), but the kind rooted in service. Leadership that listens before it acts. Leadership that heals instead of hierarchies. That became my breakthrough: understanding that giving is not a luxury of the privileged, it’s a right of the human spirit. Even when you have nothing, you can still give something — your time, your story, your care.
38	There’s a verse I often think about: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Whether you see that through faith or humanism, it speaks to something powerful: the idea that kindness is a form of nation-building. Each time someone welcomed me, they weren’t just helping a person. They were quietly shaping the kind of country we can become.

39	That's why I tell this part of my story so openly, not to dramatize pain, but to show that mental health and belonging are inseparable. When you strip people of purpose, they break. When you trust them with purpose, they rise.
40	That's the paradox the asylum system hasn't learned yet. We spend millions managing people's despair, when we could spend far less empowering their potential. My recovery didn't come from therapy alone. It came from contribution. It came from feeling useful again.
41	So when people ask how I "made it through," I tell them: I didn't do it alone. A nurse saw me. A volunteer invited me. A community believed in me before I believed in myself. And that's how one broken night turned into the foundation of a life devoted to systems change.
42	And it's from that point, from the edge of despair, that my leadership journey began.
43	People often think leadership starts with confidence. Mine started with doubt. I didn't set out to lead, I set out to make myself useful. But sometimes, purpose finds you before you feel ready. The first time someone called me a "leader," I felt uncomfortable. I was twenty, volunteering at Manchester Mind, helping run 1-1 advise sessions for those needing help with benefits, housing or debt advise. All I was doing was listening, asking questions, helping them get the support they needed But one of paid advisors, Joe, said to me, "You make them feel seen." - because one of the usual visitors asked why i wasnt the one helping the week i was off. And I realised , maybe that's what leadership actually is.
44	Over the years, that small beginning grew. From local volunteering to national boards, from helping on small projects to shaping national policy. Eventually, I found myself co-chairing the #iwill movement, a coalition of hundreds of organisations committed to youth social action. A movement that has reached millions of young people and, through the #iwill Fund, helped distribute over £112 million in match funding from government and The National Lottery Community Fund.
45	Sitting at those tables, government meetings, boardrooms, funding

	committees, I often think about that waiting room. The contrast couldn't be starker: from waiting to be called, to now being someone who helps call others in. But I never forget that the power I have now is borrowed, borrowed from the trust of those who believed in me. And the only way to keep it ethical is to use it to open doors for others.
46	I have far too many board positions to list, Each role is different, but the principle stays the same: leadership is not upward mobility; it's outward responsibility.
47	I remember the first time I chaired a meeting for the #iWill Movement . I was sitting next to people who had decades of experience. Part of me still felt like the asylum-seeker kid in the waiting room. But another part of me understood something new: expertise doesn't just come from education or privilege. It also comes from lived reality, from knowing how policy feels in your bones.
48	That's why I push for more people with lived experience to be part of decision-making, not as tokens but as equals. Because when those who've been through systems help redesign them, the results are smarter, cheaper, and more humane. It's not charity, it's strategy.
49	And something else shifted for me: I realised leadership doesn't mean hiding your scars. It means using them as blueprints for better structures. When I speak to other young refugees now, I tell them: your pain isn't your weakness; it's your strength, its your data. It shows you where systems break, and that makes you uniquely qualified to help rebuild them.
50	Every board I sit on teaches me a version of the same truth: you can't fix what you refuse to see. That's why representation matters, not for optics, but for accuracy. Because people closest to the problem are also closest to the solution.
51	When I finally received refugee status earlier this year it wasn't just legal recognition. It was emotional permission to dream longer-term. I could finally plan a future. That's when I launched my consultancy, helping organisations navigate equity and systems strategy. It's work that sits at the intersection of lived experience and structural insight.
52	For the first time, I could make a living not by surviving, but by shaping. And now I'm finally studying Management with Digital Innovation and Analytics at Royal Holloway, University of London, not as a student

	escaping hardship, but as one expanding capacity. I now longer need to go to university but I've wanted to for so long. I want to combine data with empathy, policy with humanity, so that decision-makers can't hide behind ignorance anymore.
53	Looking back, what strikes me is how leadership never felt like a single moment of arrival. It's a continuum of service. Every time I think I've reached stability, I remember there are thousands still in limbo, and that's what keeps me moving.
54	We may have lost a country, but we will not lose our kindness. That sentence is my compass. Because no matter how many board meetings or projects I join, leadership without kindness is just management. But kindness with structure that's nation-building.
55	And that's the bridge I now stand on , between lived experience and institutional change, between past suffering and future reform. Not as a symbol, but as a reminder that systems can only change when the people who survived them sit at the table designing what comes next.
56	So back to the system: what works and what doesn't? It's not all flawed
	Section 5
57	After years inside the system and now years working around it, I've seen both the harm and the hope. The asylum system is often talked about in absolutes — broken or functional, generous or hostile. But like most systems, the truth lives in the details.
58	Let's start with what works. Not perfectly, but meaningfully, the things that save lives, often without headlines
59	One. Community Networks Work Across Manchester and beyond, I've seen local sanctuary groups, churches, mosques, synagogues, charities, quietly doing what government often can't. They respond fast. They listen. They treat people as neighbours, not numbers. City of Sanctuary, whose Manchester charity I chair, started as an idea around a kitchen table. Today, it's a movement in over 100 towns and cities across the UK. What makes it powerful is simple: hospitality scaled up through relationships. When government systems move slowly, these networks become the nation's moral infrastructure.
60	Two. Mental health integration works

	Refugees carry trauma, but it's not only trauma from war or persecution. It's trauma from years of waiting, stigma, and isolation. When mental health is embedded early in refugee support, people rebuild faster. When it's ignored, problems multiply, addiction, self-harm, long-term dependency. Manchester Mind, Refugee Action, and similar local groups show what's possible when mental health is seen as part of integration, not an afterthought.
61	Three. Youth Leadership Works When young people affected by systems are invited to lead, everything changes. They bring insight adults overlook. At #iwill, I've seen young people design campaigns, advise ministers, and change how funding is distributed. Their involvement isn't symbolic, it's structural. Youth leadership programs don't just create future citizens; they build current contributors. And that's a return on investment no economic model captures.
62	Now what fails? Endless Waiting Twelve years in limbo taught me that time is the cruellest form of control. The Home Office backlog has been over 100,000 people. Behind every file is a stalled life, education lost, careers paused, relationships frozen. Delay doesn't protect borders; it damages human potential. And potential, once delayed, doesn't always return.
63	Centralised, Suspicious bureaucracy is just as bad Decision-making in the asylum process is siloed, inconsistent, and reactive. People are assessed not by credibility of evidence, but by credibility of emotion. Frontline officers carry impossible caseloads and little trauma training. Policy changes faster than practice. A system built on suspicion inevitably produces injustice, because you cannot design compassion through distrust.
64	Exclusion from Design The people most affected by policy are almost never in the room when it's written. Refugees aren't invited to consult, or to decide.

	Often tokenism disguised as participation. And it keeps the system one step removed from reality. Imagine if people who've lived through asylum delays co-designed new workflows, digital systems, and welfare models. We'd save millions in efficiency, and more importantly, we'd save people years of waiting.
65	There are other failures too: Legal aid collapsing under underfunding. Media narratives that dehumanize for clicks. Policies that treat deterrence as morality. Each one chips away at national integrity.
	Section 6
66	If we redesigned the asylum system around human potential, not control, it would look radically different. Here's what I believe are the three pillars of transformation, drawn from both lived experience and leadership
67	By making dignity part of infrastructure We build roads, hospitals, schools, but we rarely build dignity into our public systems. Yet it's the foundation for everything else. Imagine a process where every decision begins with one question: Does this preserve or erode human dignity? That question alone would change training, policy, and public trust. When people feel seen, they cooperate. When they feel degraded, they resist. That's not morality; that's neuroscience.
68	True reform means sharing power. Not consultation, co-design. That means embedding refugees, young people, and community representatives into decision-making boards, grant committees, and policy review panels. At #iwill Fund, we've trialled youth-led grantmaking where young people control funding decisions. It works. It's transparent, efficient, and builds civic confidence. Now imagine that applied to migration policy , a system accountable to the people it affects.
69	We can frame integrity as Innovation Refugees aren't a burden. They're an untapped engine of creativity and resilience.

	History proves it, from business founders to NHS doctors to cultural leaders. Integration isn't charity. It's investment. When people are allowed to work, study, and contribute early, the whole economy benefits. Portugal, for instance, links refugee integration to entrepreneurship. Canada treats it as community development. We could do the same, building social capital while meeting labour shortages and regenerating towns.
70	When I speak to policymakers, I tell them: The question isn't "how do we manage migration?" It's "how do we manage our own fear of generosity?" Because generosity is strategic. It stabilises communities, strengthens economies, and renews our shared humanity. Transformation, though, isn't just about government. It's also about us, citizens, voters, faith communities, business leaders. Every time we choose understanding over suspicion, we're shaping the social weather of this country. And right now, the weather feels cold. But climate is changeable, and warmth is contagious.
71	When I finally held my refugee status letter, I expected relief. What I felt instead was responsibility. Because if the system finally worked for me, even after twelve years, then I had a duty to help make sure it works faster, fairer, and more human for the next person. That's what transformation looks like in practice, when those who've suffered under a system become architects of its repair. And the truth is, transformation won't come from one speech or one policy. It comes from an alliance of values, across politics, faiths, and sectors that insists on dignity as the baseline of belonging. We don't need to agree on everything to agree on humanity. I often remind myself that every policy choice is a moral choice in disguise. When we reduce someone's humanity, we reduce our own. When we invest in belonging, we invest in stability.
72	The future I imagine isn't utopian. It's simply one where the word refugee means potential, not pity. Where systems are not built to contain people, but to release their contribution. Where belonging is not granted at the end of a process, but built from the first welcome.

	That's the transformation worth fighting for. Not just for refugees, but for what kind of society we all become.
	Section 7
73	I want to finish where I began, in that waiting room. Because that space, uncomfortable as it was, taught me more about leadership, humanity, and systems than any classroom or boardroom ever could. Sitting there as a child, I used to think belonging was something someone else would hand to me. Now I know it's something you build every day, through the choices you make, the systems you create, the people you lift.
74	That's the paradox of displacement: it strips everything away until you realise what truly matters. Not status, not speed, not approval but connection. The knowledge that someone, somewhere, sees you as human. If I could speak to that ten-year-old version of myself in the waiting room now, I'd tell him: "You're not waiting to be chosen. You're waiting to choose." Because agency isn't about power. It's about deciding that even when systems erase you, you'll keep showing up anyway.
75	agency is what transforms pain into purpose, despair into design. It's what turns a personal story into public leadership. And leadership, at its best, is simply the practice of enlarging hope.
76	As I stand here today, a British refugee, a social entrepreneur, a consultant, a student, a human, I see both privilege and responsibility. Privilege, because I now have platforms that many never reach. Responsibility, because I carry their stories with me.
77	Every time I sit in a boardroom, I think about the people still in that queue. Every policy I help shape, I imagine how it would land on someone living on asylum support. That mental check is how I stay grounded,how I make sure power doesn't make me forget where I came from. In many ways, my story isn't extraordinary. There are thousands like me, people rebuilding after war, persecution, or identity-based violence. What makes it worth sharing is what it represents: that resilience is not rare, it's just rarely recognised.
78	I've learned that transformation begins with proximity. You can't understand systems from a distance. You have to get close, to stories, to pain, to potential.

	Proximity breeds understanding, and understanding breeds accountability.
79	If there's one thing I want to leave you with, it's this: We talk about refugees as if they are a separate group, but the truth is — displacement is part of the human condition. Every one of us, at some point, will feel displaced. By loss, by change, by injustice. And in those moments, what saves us is community, people who refuse to let us disappear.
80	So the refugee story isn't their story. It's our story, about how societies choose to respond when someone arrives at their door asking for safety. It's a mirror of our collective ethics. And the question that follows is simple: When history looks back, will we be remembered as a country that closed its doors, or as one that learned to open its heart intelligently, compassionately, and confidently?
81	I believe we can build a system that works , one that protects both borders and dignity, one that measures success not by how many people we exclude, but by how many we empower to contribute. Because inclusion isn't weakness; it's resilience. And hope isn't naive; it's infrastructure. If we choose to act from that belief, in our institutions, our faith spaces, our workplaces then belonging becomes not an act of charity, but an act of leadership. And that's where all transformation starts: with people who decide that kindness will be their strategy.
82	I want you to think on 3 questions 1.Who in your world is still waiting to be seen? 2. What small act could you take this week to turn sympathy into solidarity? 3. How can you use your platform - whatever its size, to make belonging possible for someone else? Those questions aren't rhetorical. They're the real work of change. Because systems don't shift through slogans they shift when ordinary people decide that exclusion isn't who we are.

83	When I look back now, I see a clear line from that waiting room to this stage. Not because the journey was easy , it wasn't. But because, at every stage, someone chose humanity over indifference. A nurse, a teacher, a volunteer, a policymaker. Those choices add up. They become culture. That's how nations heal , one small mercy at a time. So thank you for listening, for reflecting, and for holding space for stories like mine. But more importantly, thank you for considering how to turn that reflection into reform, and that compassion into policy. Because words don't change systems, people do. People like me. People like you. People like us. Thank you

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