

**THROUGH  
THE  
EYES**



**OF YOUNG  
MIGRANTS**

**SIPHO SIBANDA**



## Introduction

My name is Siphon Sibanda. I am an activist focused on human rights and I also enjoy working with young people and have done so professionally and voluntarily. I am a mother, feminist, socialist, a strong believer in God, and emerging leader in my community from Belfast via Zimbabwe.

I was a participant on the Social Change Initiative's Peace Leadership programme. SCI provided resources to allow me to facilitate and bring together a group of young people from ethnic minority backgrounds to explore their response to the UK 'hostile environment' and life in Northern Ireland.

This short report reflects what we heard from a group of twenty children and young people, mainly teenagers, from Belfast – via Poland, Somalia, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Mauritius – who joined us for a residential weekend in Co Down in February, 2022.

**Instead of the hostile environment, what I discovered was they actually wanted to talk about racism and how their lives are controlled by this issue in Northern Ireland. The way they do things, how they interact with other young people, and how their daily lives unfold.**

**It can be difficult for them to talk about this with their parents as they felt it would be another burden to them.**

**The conversations I had with the children and young people felt very raw. I wasn't ready for it. This is home for all of us now, yet many don't feel at home.**

Ninety-nine percent said no, they didn't see Belfast as home, including kids born here. Children who have never been to where their parents are from, still didn't say, I am from north Belfast or south Belfast and so on.

They hold on to the hope that one day they will go away. They hold on to a dream that it is better where they came from or where their parents came from. This hope is also driven by a sense of a lack of belonging they said is due to their everyday experiences within schools and the community.

They dream of being somewhere they won't be picked on, where there are 'more people like me'. They yearn to belong. Here is how our weekend diary unfolded:

## Friday

We took a bus from Youth Action NI in Belfast city centre to Newcastle. Twenty children and young people were with us. Some of them knew each other from youth club. Others didn't. There were slightly more girls than boys, around a 60/40 split.

Myself, Coumilah Majoo, Youth Action youth workers Ryan Shaw & Joseph Dean Greene and Sudanese community youth ambassador Tona, were facilitators for the weekend along with staff at the venue who facilitated the activities all weekend.

We arrived at the venue and went for dinner. We did bedroom allocation in the lounge, trying to put the young people who didn't know each other together to help build trust and new friendships.

We sat together for introductions, talked about expectations of the weekend, highlighted our thoughts and feelings and created a group contract which everyone contributed to.



## Group Contract

1. - Be respectful
2. - Be helpful
3. - Be polite
4. - Be connected
5. - Be inclusive
6. - Limit phones
7. - Listen to others
8. - Stick to times

We talked about the outdoor activities available and allowed the young people to get to know each other and know us, the facilitators. They were enjoying the freedom of being away. There was an earlier night for some than others. The dorms fell silent at around 3am.

## Saturday

We had breakfast. Food provision for the Muslim community was an issue. There were staffing problems due to Covid and the venue, but they worked with us to get around this.

After breakfast we had a group conversation. This was meant to be a free-flowing conversation about migration and immigration, but it turned out differently.

It became apparent that the young people wanted to express how they felt about their new home. We went with the flow and spoke about what the young people wanted to discuss.

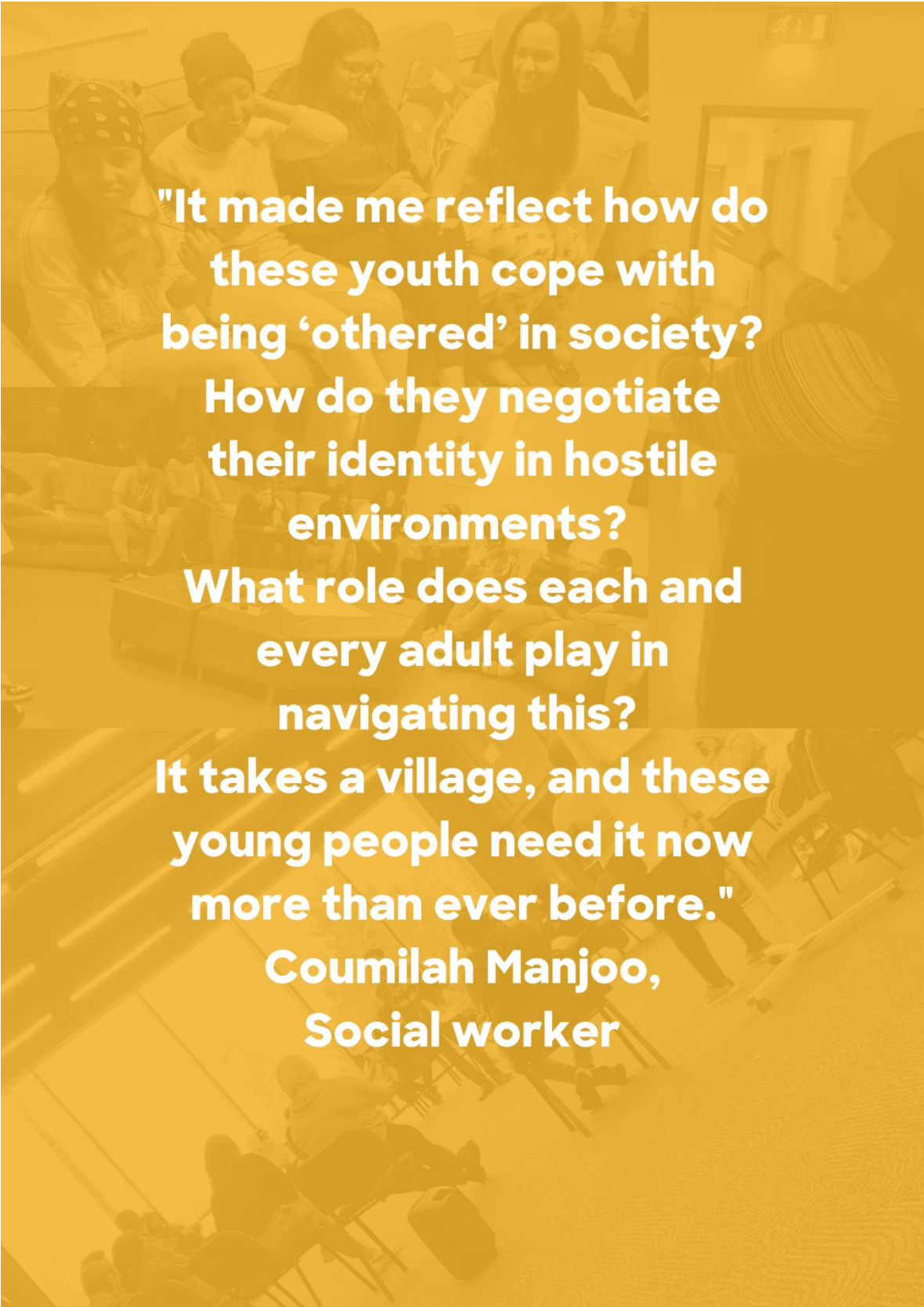
They wanted to talk about their experiences of racism and why they feel that Northern Ireland isn't home for them.

They spoke about not being able to talk to their parents about some of the experiences they have, because they did not want to burden their parents.

They were aware their parents are already dealing with racial challenges, resettling challenges and integration, so they did not want to add to their worries.

The immigration process, moving countries and the journeys that people have to endure, somehow does this to children's emotional growth. We as adults do not take it in at the time. They grow quicker than they are supposed to, taking on a burden they are not supposed to be carrying. This is a young people's issue, a policy issue, that should be of concern to those in power.

It also highlights our lack of data and lack of resourcing and focus on young people, particularly migrant children.



**"It made me reflect how do  
these youth cope with  
being 'othered' in society?  
How do they negotiate  
their identity in hostile  
environments?**

**What role does each and  
every adult play in  
navigating this?**

**It takes a village, and these  
young people need it now  
more than ever before."**

**Coumilah Manjoo,  
Social worker**

## The Issues

One girl spoke about being called ‘challenging’ by a school leader and told to change herself. The girl sensed discomfort among teaching staff when the topics of racism and ethnicity and discrimination came up. She was then made to feel like she needed to have an opinion and sometimes felt singled out and targeted a lot.

Awareness of the PSNI handling of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations during the pandemic was acute. It concerned the young people. Some good came out of the demos but they saw only damage. The damage to relationships and views about the police was done. We need to work on solutions to resolve this.

The young people spoke to us about their negative experiences with the police, of ‘stop and search’. One example given was of a white male adult attacking three teenage boys and when police arrived the boys were the focus of the police attention. Another boy spoke about how he was aware of “numbers”. If there were more than two black young people walking in some parts of Belfast, such as the Botanic area, they felt police were more likely to stop and search them, but this was less likely if they were in a mixed group with white friends.

**It highlights the need for relationship building with police and that training for police is required. It was viewed that they look at them as black children causing trouble and therefore there is little to no confidence in police being viewed as adults that will help.**

One young teenager spoke of being ‘chilled and peaceful’ because he is a Muslim and that he found it difficult in Belfast that boys in his area constantly wanted to fight him and chase him. He was ‘tired of it’.

Some of the girls going to their local youth club highlighted incidences of racism. On one occasion they were approached by white adult men and intimidated. The men targeted the youngest in the group, asking her if she was married. It was clear she was around 14 and the abuse was happening because they saw she had a hijab on.

Girls in the groups also reported altering their traditional dress in an attempt to minimise racism. They said it was easier for them to wear a hairband and hooded top, with the hood up, instead of a hijab, to try to stop negative attention.

They said they were modifying their appearance for their personal safety and an easier life. One girl was subjected to racism on a bus. She was told to go back where she came from and a number of the young people spoke about being harassed walking through Belfast city centre.

It was mainly but not exclusively white adult men engaged in the kind of abusive behaviour highlighted by the group.

Most of the young people said they want out of Belfast as soon as they can. That they do not feel at home.

They also spoke about being limited in engagement with local children and communities. That it often stops at school. The older teenagers said there are limited opportunities to mix with the children they are friendly with inside school, outside of school, partly because they do not want to drink alcohol or take illegal drugs. Social activities can be limited to youth clubs, so isolation is an issue.

The group was not keen on the idea of counselling at school. They said counsellors often ask about where they are from. One boy said 'they just ask about war' and what they may have witnessed rather than about how they are feeling now.

**The conversation we had as a group felt therapeutic. The question we have now is, what do we do about what we heard?**

**How can we as a society make this not so inclusive place be inclusive enough for our children to call it their home?**



**“It was a great weekend with fantastic young people and humbling to hear some powerful stories, but also thoughts and insights about how we move forward to a shared society.”**

**Ryan Shaw,  
Youth Action NI**



## What the young people want

To have fun, learn and be happy. The young people spoke about what they like and enjoy. This ranged from dancing, singing, art and rapping, to playing games, having fun with Tik Tok and listening to music.

They also explored what they would like to see happening in society. They want people from Belfast to recognise they are part of Belfast. They spoke about wanting people to see them for who they are and not the colour of their skin. One of the kids said they wanted to go to an Arabic country so there would be people that look like them.

There was limited to no understanding of the conflict and politics in Northern Ireland, not dissimilar to young white teenagers who are also more interested in their friends and lives, than anything else.

They wanted to play outside in the snow and have a laugh, which is what they did before lunch. Following food there was a regrouping and then outdoor activities.



## Team building

Zip-lining, archery, laser guns and football helped let off steam after emotional conversations. They all became friends and encouraged each other to do things. Some were afraid so they helped each other.

Afterwards everyone had chicken curry for dinner and cleaned up. Then there was time for chilling-out and reflections. The group participated in a visual exercise that involved people on the tree and where they saw themselves on the tree. Were they at the top of the tree, lying down because they were tired, and so on.

**Some reflected that they had new intentions and had found new friendships during the residential. Reconnecting with each other after Covid was a theme for some. Some had never been on a residential, so did not know what to expect, but had enjoyed the experience.**

After some initial worries the parents didn't phone much over the course of the residential. It provided the children with space.

They deserved to be away, to take time out, to have the chance to be themselves in a different environment.

There was lots of music and dancing in their free time in the evening, with the last to bed at 2am.

## Sunday

Everyone was exhausted. We had breakfast, packed up and had space for anyone to reflect more or say what they wanted. They were very grateful, all happy and ready to go home.

## Reflections and recommendations

On Census Day 2021, 3.4% of the population of Northern Ireland, or 65,600 people, belonged to minority ethnic groups. This is around double the 2011 figure (1.8% – 32,400 people) and four times the 2001 figure (0.8% – 14,300 people).

This means we have an increasingly diverse population across ethnic groups, main language, country of birth and passports held. This increasing diversity is evident to a greater or lesser degree across all 11 local councils.

With this in mind, ethnic minorities cannot be ignored. They are a growing population and there is a need for inclusivity in financial, strategic decision making and planning in Northern Ireland.

Policy development: People in positions of power need to consider racism and young people and how it affects them.

Financial impact: What funding pots are available to young migrant children? Everyone is feeling the pinch.

Of the people who have migrated, many are not working for a variety of reasons, including no recourse to public funds, or do not have extra resources for treats beyond the basic cost of living.

It is wrong when children do not have treats, the luxury to get away from home for a weekend, to go on a holiday. Children are being punished by the system. They are feeling the impact of how their parents are treated which is damaging to their mental health.

Invest now. Invest in young people. It's nothing new. Outcomes are better for individuals, economy, community, society, if we invest in young people and cater to their specific needs.

## Next steps

Many thanks to all those who took part in the event and the production of this report. Thanks also to the Human Rights Centre at Queen's University Belfast who hosted the launch of the report. Please contact me by email with your reflections, bright ideas, or proposals for collaboration: [Siphosibanda708@gmail.com](mailto:Siphosibanda708@gmail.com)

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**SOCIAL  
CHANGE  
INITIATIVE**