

## SEEKING ASYLUM IN IRELAND: EMMA SOYE IN CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR FRANK BERRY ABOUT 'AISHA'



*Frank Berry is the writer and director of 'Aisha', a film about a young woman from Nigeria who was forced to leave her home after violence towards her family. The film follows her life after she claims asylum in the Republic of Ireland, beginning in Dublin where she works part-time as a hairdresser and lives in an accommodation centre under Ireland's 'Direct Provision' system for asylum seekers. There she meets Conor, a security guard, and they strike up a friendship. While this could have developed into a 'white saviour romance' story, the film does not take this path. Aisha is moved to accommodation centres*

*throughout the country, becoming increasingly concerned about her mother's safety in Nigeria and her own chances of being granted asylum in Ireland. With profound care and sensitivity, the film shows how Aisha navigates the hugely frustrating - and often shockingly inhumane - bureaucracy of the asylum system, providing rich insight into the challenges the system presents, not only to safety, but also to dignity and the very ability to survive.*

*Emma Soye spoke to Frank Berry about the film and its potential as an educational resource.*

Emma Soye (ES)

What drew you to this project?

Frank Berry (FB)

I began researching Ireland's Direct Provision system while researching my previous film about the Irish prison system. I discovered that both systems at the time were the responsibility of the same government department, the Department of Justice, and I was interested in knowing more about the experiences of people coming to Ireland seeking international protection.

ES

The film was researched with current and former asylum seekers in the Republic of Ireland. Can you tell me more about the research process?

FB

In January 2017, I made contact with Lucky Khambule, the co-founder of Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland (MASI). Lucky and I met at the accommodation centre in Dublin where he was living and he told me about the reality of life in Direct Provision, how the system has caused additional suffering for already traumatised people. Through Lucky I met more people with lived experience of Direct Provision and from there I continued on a journey of primary research, meeting with people and listening to the experiences they felt comfortable sharing. In 2018, I started meeting with participants of the Mukisa programme in County Waterford, an educational programme focused on creating opportunities for, and supporting the integration of, asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland. Among the many inspiring people I got to know in Waterford were several Nigerian women who made a significant impact on the story. In workshops we explored aspects of life as an asylum seeker in Ireland such as

engaging with a protracted legal system, the power that centre managers have over the lives of residents, and what it's like to live for years under the threat of deportation. During this collaborative process I find that a picture starts to emerge as to what this story could be, one that echoes many experiences. For this film what started to emerge was a theme of a human connection in an inhumane system.

ES A recurring theme throughout the film is the emphasis in the asylum system on legitimising one's asylum claim through telling one's 'story'. 'Try to put them in the room', Aisha's solicitor advises her. When asked to tell her (intensely painful) 'story' during her asylum appeal, Aisha finally cracks, admonishing them, 'This is not a story!'. There is also, perhaps, an implicit rebuke to those viewers who watch the film seeking entertainment in the form of a 'story'. What did you seek to do in making the film?

FB My films are fictional dramas but they come from a documentary impulse. I want the audience to feel like they are watching real life. The aim with all my work is to ask the audience to consider the life experiences of other people, often marginalised characters in society, and to consider how they would feel if they found themselves in that situation. The overall drive is to evoke compassion and understanding.

ES How did you want to portray Aisha? How does this differ from other portrayals of asylum seekers in the media?

FB

Our primary focus in the depiction of the Aisha character was to make her as real as possible. Her character was developed from numerous conversations and workshops over the years. But most significantly, as I mentioned, through working with a group of Nigerian women I met in Waterford, who were taking part in an educational programme called the Mukisa programme. We worked hard to put on paper a realistic experience for Aisha, based on their lived experience. During the process we would frequently read the script out loud to authenticate it. The final part of the journey is of course the performance. Letitia Wright, who played Aisha, connected deeply with what we had done, and felt very strongly about playing the part. When we were filming, I stepped aside, and we watched the character of Aisha blossom from the page into life. Letitia brought so much to the role, much more than I could ever write from my perspective. The result of this process is a very human, real performance that I think delves deeper than many of the depictions of asylum seekers that we are used to seeing in films.

ES

In an early scene, Aisha is doing the makeup of other women living in the accommodation centre. The camera focuses on their faces in the mirror as they tell her about their experiences of the asylum system in Ireland. The effect is intimate and personal. Can you say more about this?

FB

I have a community video and documentary filmmaking background, and all of my feature films draw on these roots. The collaborative nature of my research is carried into every part of the filmmaking process. For example, with each film it is important

that the people who I researched the film with are represented on screen, either as actors, special extras or extras. And during the editing process I screen various versions of the cut along the way with the community, to make sure I'm on the right track. The documentary sequence you mention was a deliberate effort to be inclusive and to remind the audience that the feelings they are experiencing watching the film are very real for people living in Direct Provision at the moment.

ES

A close friendship (and something more) slowly develops between Aisha and Conor, the security guard at the accommodation centre in Dublin. Early on in the film, Conor tells Aisha, 'I just do what I'm told'. But as the film progresses, he starts to subvert the stereotype of the faceless bureaucrat through small acts of resistance, such as sneaking Aisha into the kitchen to put her halal food into the fridge. By the end of the film, he seems to need her as much as – if not more – than she needs him. What did you hope to show through this?

FB

I try as much as possible to not make things up when writing the script. The aim is for the story to emerge during a long and expansive process of discussions and workshops. During these meetings I mentioned how I came to this subject via researching the prison system in Ireland. This opened up conversations about how a person seeking international protection is looked upon and treated in Ireland and what the rationale could be to have the immigration system run by the Department of Justice? So through these conversations we brought the Conor character into the room as a sort of organic development from my

previous film. It felt right that his character emerged in this way, and opened up conversations about his relationship to Aisha, and how they form a very genuine friendship, one that represents a simple human connection. We thought that by asking the audience to identify with this human connection, we could express a lot by placing that recognisable relationship in the context of Direct Provision.

ES What changes, if any, do you hope the film might lead to?

FB There has been a very active and vocal movement to end the Direct Provision system in Ireland over the last few years, spearheaded by Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland (MASI) and other activist groups, journalists, non-governmental organisations, artists and citizens, and my hope is that this film joins the chorus of objection. I don't make any great claims for the film to lead to major change but I do believe it was worth making. I think it is valuable and purposeful to have a realistic depiction of a system that exists in the name of every Irish person, out in the world. Hopefully the film will create further spaces in society for important discussion.

### References

*Aisha* (2022) Directed by Frank Berry. Ireland: BBC Film, Subotica, Wavelength, World of Ha Productions.

**Emma Soye** is Assistant Editor on *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*. She is the author of *Peer Relationships at School: New Perspectives on Migration and Diversity* (2024, Bristol University Press).

**Frank Berry** is an award-winning filmmaker whose work focuses on important social issues in Ireland. To date he has directed the films *Ballymun Lullaby*, *I Used to Live Here*, *Michael Inside* and *Aisha*.