

Mala Savjani—the third interviewee in my [chain interview experiment](#)



Mala was introduced by my second interviewee, [Isabel Bottoms](#). This is what she said: 'I suggest my housemate, Mala. She'll be a great interviewee because she's active on a number of fronts, particularly immigration and feminism - two things I'm not much involved in yet. She's always very open minded and good at facilitating when talking to people much less experienced or knowledgeable than her: a great trait. She's also very enthusiastic and engaging, so you can be sure of having a good chat that might lead you both to unexpected places.... '

Now in her mid-twenties, Mala was a founder member of an online group called Wolf-Whistled where young women can post articles about the things that concern them; often what might be called 'feminist' issues. Mala's particular interests are transgender politics and also the damage that easy access internet pornography can do to young boys' attitudes towards women. However, when we met up on a rainy

February evening in Farringdon our main topic of conversation was Mala's experiences with refugees and asylum seekers. There was plenty to talk about.

Can you tell me about the things that are really important to you, Mala?

At the moment I'm working as a paralegal in the immigration department of a big law firm. It's something that I'm finding quite complicated but human rights law is what I was most passionate about when I left university.

How did you get interested in that?

All kinds of societies can grab your interest at university and when I was at Bristol I ended up having a very random conversation about the organisation, [Student Action for Refugees](#). That got me started and during my second year I went to a weekend conference in London where there was a range of speakers. It was quite amazing. They got people who'd been granted refugee status in the UK to speak about their past experiences. And one of them was a Burmese man - there was something about the space and the number of people there that made it incredibly emotive – it sounds a bit of a cliché but it was a turning point for me. He was a very intelligent man and had been doing well in his studies. But he was also fairly high up in a student organisation that was trying to revolt against the Government. He was punished for this and described how he was held in a pit of maggots and they submerged his head at one point. It was the way he told it – I just thought, 'How on earth can these things actually happen to people?' I think it's really easy to be totally disconnected. I think I am most days but to be in a room with somebody who has been through this, and is looking at you, and to see they've survived it is extraordinary. I remember when he spoke, it made me cry. And there's so much disbelief around. I don't believe half the stories I hear but there was absolutely no way you could sit there and say about him 'I don't believe you.' And now he's built himself a completely new life and is working for the BBC. I just thought 'Wow that's quite incredible.'

So there was that but my interest also came from going into different parts of Bristol and getting to know other organisations like [City of Sanctuary](#). That's how I got to find out a lot more about asylum seekers and refugee rights. Within the space of six months it went from being something I knew very little about, to something that consumed all my time and energy. I think my parents thought it was a bit of a fad and I would go on to find other more interesting things.

So you went to the conference and then what happened?

I spent a year abroad as part of my French and German degree. Six months of that was in Berlin and I lived in quite a hippy household where the people there decided to go and blockade a road. They wanted to help a group of asylum seekers to stay living in a house where they were squatting. The police were trying to get them out. Attitudes throughout Western Europe tend to be quite similar: 'Well, it's a bit crap but it's not our problem.'

Then when I got back to university for the fourth year my friend, Liv and I decided to run Student Action for Refugees in Bristol. It was quite a big commitment and I was struggling in my grammar modules. I needed to put a lot of time into trying to pull those marks up to make sure I got a 2:1 but much of the time when I was in the library I would be on my laptop typing up notes from meetings or on the phone trying to find spaces for events. One of the things we did was to



organise a sleep out to highlight that there are lots of destitute asylum seekers in the UK. They're given something like £35 a week to live on. That has to cover everything including their food and travel expenses. Students from the society joined in this big sleep out and we had a lot of homeless people with us, too. It was a really cold night – quite extraordinarily freezing in fact. I don't know how much it achieved. You never know with these things but it was definitely quite a wake-up call for me. Our local MP came down to support it and it raised awareness with lots of people who had no idea about these things.

By the end of my fourth year I'd spoken to a lot of people and realised something important. Some people are good at campaigning. They lobby and try to create change but I'm not well suited to that. It seemed so big to me and I wasn't sure where to start or whether I'd achieve anything. But the thing you hear again and again within the refugee community is that there's a need for more good lawyers. So I decided that I was going to go for it and do a conversion course. That took another two years. I moved back home and did my Graduate Diploma in Law and the Legal Practice Course in London. After that I started at a Legal Aid firm doing asylum human rights work for people in detention. I went to detention centres all round the South of England like Dover, and the ones near Heathrow and Gatwick.

What were your first impressions of the detention centres?

The first one I went to was Harmondsworth. My best friend is a theatre director and she'd just directed a play about a detention centre called Eye of a Needle. It showed random waiting rooms where Home Office staff and legal aid representatives just sit and talk to one another. The reviews were incredible but even so it seemed rather unbelievable. Then the first time that I turned up at a detention centre, it was exactly like that. I've never seen so many locked doors. I've spoken to people who've worked in prisons and I think there are more locked doors in detention centres than there are in a lot of prisons.



You walk in and go through the first building where you have to log in and get a badge. There's a waiting room and once you become well versed in what's going on then you know to go through to the back. Then you end up at another check-in desk where they log you in again and then you go through a door. When that closes you're in quite a small space, like being vacuum-packed. Then another door opens and someone does a full body search on you. They tell you to open your mouth and

take off your shoes. That sort of thing. And then you're led through to another waiting area. You might wait there for a while and then the guard takes you through to a third building where it smells really clinical. You go upstairs into a room where you see your client. And next to this are the rooms where the detainees live. You never get to see those rooms but the walls are very thin. When I was at Colnbrook a lot of detainees were protesting and it was very loud. Someone had committed suicide and they were trying to get this looked into properly. The first time I went to Harmondsworth there was a changeover going on. G4S had been running the centre but it had just transferred over to Mitie, another big security company. It was horrible – I cried. It was absolutely horrible.

What was it that made you cry?

It was meeting my first client. He was an incredibly sweet man who reminded me of one of my Dad's cousins. He spoke fantastic English and was a very educated man from Kerala in Southern India. Anyway, he'd been in the UK illegally for about ten years and had made a life for himself. He was trying to make a human rights claim so he could stay here. But it was a hopeless case. I had to ask if he wanted to make an asylum claim because that's what was on the questionnaire. And he said, 'Why do people keep asking me this? I don't feel any persecution where I've come from. Are you asking me to lie? I've been here for ten years and I've lots of things to offer. I want to do anything I can to stay here but I'm not a liar – I've got my dignity.' There was something very humble about him. He was a single man in his fifties who didn't know anyone in the centre and he was wearing a pair of flip flops in the middle of winter. What touched me was the clarity with which he said he wanted to stay but wasn't going to lie about it. A lot of people will say that they're happy not to tell the truth because that will get them what they want and I don't know that I wouldn't do if the boot was on the other foot. But it was my job to apply the law, not to question it. In so many situations I'd think that if only the law was written in another way there would be people who would be able to stay here. But as things stood, however, much agility I might have had, there was no way that his individual situation was going to allow him to stay.

I had to do a basic exam to do that job but it didn't prepare me at all for being faced with people who are having really terrible problems. You go in saying, 'I'm here as your legal representative.' But all you're actually saying is 'I'm here as another human being who has supposedly done enough training to help you.'

What other impressions did you have of the detention centres?



Well, there are about ten detention centres in the UK and Harmondsworth is the biggest. It has about 600 people. But people also get held in prisons under immigration detention laws. So there are thousands and thousands of people locked up. In the detention centres it's not like the detainees have nothing - I've even heard people say that they would rather be in there than on the street as it's warm. They aren't malnourished or anything like that but the thing is that they're absolutely denied all of their freedom. There's really high barbed wire, and yellow light all the time. And they have no idea when they're going to get out. At least with criminal issues you know the maximum sentence you have to serve but in a detention centre there's no onus on anyone to tell you when you'll be out. Some people have been in detention for seven or eight years. And another really horrible thing is that if you're detained for more than four weeks you have a 90% chance of developing some kind of mental health problem. At first I was overwhelmed but then quite quickly I became hardened to it. I worked with a couple of great people who really were in it to help the people in detention. I also worked with a lot of people who did it as a nine-to-five job and knew that by ticking the boxes then Legal Aid would pay them even if at the end of the year they'd actually won very few cases. To be honest I don't blame them for that because the whole system is so confused. There were some fast-track cases going on when I was there. Those are claims which the Home Office deals with in a matter of two weeks by doing back-to-back interviews.

What triggers a fast-track case?

It's something that's just got bigger and bigger over the past ten years. There's a question over whether the fast-track system is lawful because it's not giving claimants enough time to collate their evidence. But the Home Office says there are so many unfounded asylum claims being made that we shouldn't give people the chance to wait in the country for months on end.

I'm clearly naïve. I thought you were saying it was recognised that some people are in very difficult circumstances so they're being helped quicker.

I wish that was the reason. That would be lovely.

At the moment if you're a refugee with children and are able to get to Calais and then bring them over the border into the UK this is one of the only things that is being given more credit or weighting. If you arrive with children then the likelihood is they're not going to send you anywhere, not at least until those children reach seventeen and they can re-evaluate them as adults. But the chances of being able to bring young children from a war torn country or from where you're being persecuted are so unlikely that it's ridiculous. In the camp in Calais, most of the refugees are fairly healthy strong men who have been able to get away from wherever they were.



So that was my experience in the detention centres and it was amazing. It's something I would really love to go back to but when I have more experience. At the moment I'm in a law firm with a mixture of practices. I'm in the immigration team and do solely private work. The firm doesn't do any Legal Aid work.

What does private immigration work cover?

It's a very different kind of client from detention work. I do a lot of naturalisations. That's when someone has been in the country for the necessary amount of time and they're ready to apply to become a British citizen. That's a very straightforward application. Something else that I do a lot of is spouse applications. That's when a British citizen has met someone abroad and they want to bring them to the UK. The regulations on that became more restrictive recently. Now British citizens have to show that they're earning at least £18,600 in the UK in order to bring their partner here and if there are children then it's more on top of that. I'm also doing a lot of EU work at the moment, especially around Brexit. There are panic applications coming in; people who've been resident in the UK for years and years completely legally who are worrying that they're going to be kicked out if we leave the EU.

And then there are the Tier 1 applications. I feel uncomfortable with those. If you have £2,000,000 that you can invest in UK bonds then you get a free pass to live in the UK. You can do anything; work...study...live off your money. It's funny because they're often quite lovely people that you wouldn't know are sitting on lots of cash and investing it for visa purposes. Where I find it really tricky is when you realise that people are moving their money to the UK because they'll end up paying less tax over here than if it was in their own country. But I'm learning a lot and it's the kind of training that will make me into a good solicitor if I eventually start a training contract here. I'm working with absolutely brilliant people.

And I gather that you've been to the refugee camp in Calais?



I've been three times now. The first time, my boyfriend and I were part of a group of about a hundred who cycled on donated bikes from London to Dover and then got the ferry across. The camp's about a mile away and when you get there it's suddenly not about you and your bike and the hundred people, it's about the three thousand people in the camp. We were leaving the bikes there because when the refugees go to be interviewed by the French authorities about their immigration claims, they have to walk six miles or

so. It was August when we went, and quite a nice day and we had coffee with some people who made it for us in their makeshift house. The second time I went with my friend, Liv from university, and we took a big carload of donations. Everyone there is desperate for shoes. It was October and it was starting to get cold. When we opened up the car full of donations it felt like being swarmed. Anyone walking by wanted to see what was in it. It was an absolute frenzy.

The camp is just completely open land with lots and lots of tents on it where people live in pretty horrible conditions. It went from three thousand to six thousand people in the space of a few

months and it's had a lot of media attention. Now the authorities have started demolishing bits of the camp with bulldozers. It's a bit like a weird game. There are people there on the ground who pick up on what's happening.

They tell volunteers from the UK and other places who rush over in an attempt to help. They move all the tents and the next thing you know the whole thing has been demolished.

Then the refugees have to start building things again. There were two iconic buildings in the camp - the great church and a big mosque. And at the beginning of February the authorities demolished both of those as well. They're saying that they need to clear the land



and eventually move the camp because it's too close to the residential areas. Some of the interviews with these residents are quite extraordinary. Having said that, I can't imagine there are many people who would want a huge refugee camp to be next to their house. So you can see where their frustration comes from. But not their hostility and anger. Some of that is absolutely appalling. Photo by Michal Bělka

Can you sum up what you feel about the work you've done so far?

I've come across asylum seekers who are fleeing persecution and also people who have no human rights claims at all and just want to live in the UK. But basically when it comes down to it, we're all human. And those of us who live here are just so lucky.

Thank you so much Mala. There's plenty to think about there. And who are you going to suggest as my next interviewee?

I suggest my friend Holly Race Roughan. She's the theatre director I mentioned earlier. Feminism and climate change are important issues for her. She's currently working at the National Theatre and is a very interesting woman indeed!