

WARNING: The details of Betelhem's story may be distressing to read.

"The experience I had is too hard to erase from my memory... There is no safety for single women or children in detention"

Bethlehem Tibebe - Human Rights Activist and refugee formerly held on Nauru

Hi there Sabina Cruz,

Let me start by saying thank you - your support means we can remain fiercely independent and for that we are all grateful.

In light of International Women's Day tomorrow it is important to pause and celebrate all women - many who experience discrimination and still overcome adversity with so much courage and resilience, women just like Betelhem.

Betelhem's story is nothing short from remarkable, and she is an inspiration to me as a woman, and I am sure you too as you read her story.

Enduring four years in offshore and onshore detention, including 15 months in Nauru Detention Centre. The mental and physical impacts for Betelhem were devastating and irreversible - four years of her life she will never get back.

In her own words - here is Betelhem's journey to safety and experience in Nauru:



"I was on the boat for six days. I was the only Ethiopian, so I couldn't communicate with anyone. It was very scary and I was only 21 years old. We ran out of food and petrol. I didn't think we would survive. There was a big storm and the boat started to leak. On the sixth day, Australian Border Force found us and took us to Darwin.

After five days, guards came in the middle of the night and asked, 'Do you want to go to Nauru?' I didn't know what they meant. They told me there were education facilities there, good medical treatment and fair processes. I trusted them so I agreed to go.

Ten of us, all women, were taken to Nauru. When we arrived, we saw tents and lots of children and families crying. I was confused. Because I was the only Ethiopian, I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. For ten months we didn't have phones, television or radio, so there was no way to find out where I was.

Nauru was so hot. I'd never experienced heat like that before. For the first month, I vomited every time I ate. We were allowed one two-minute shower a day and we had to line up in the sun for it. The guards took our IDs while we showered. I didn't have any spare clothes, so I sewed new ones out of a sheet. I can't describe how bad the situation was. It was punishment, torture.

My mental health suffered, and I was transferred to Brisbane for medical treatment.

I thought this would help me feel better, but they locked me up again. Brisbane detention was the hardest experience of my life. Everyone there was from Nauru and they were always crying. When people shouted, self-harmed or were seized by guards, it made me even more stressed.

I had never felt so alone. That's when I gave up. I went on a hunger strike and lost 5 kilograms in two weeks. After this, security guards watched me twenty-four hours a day. Even when I showered, I couldn't close the door.

After four years in detention I was told, 'You are free to go today.' I was shocked. Where would I go?

I had no family. I was given a place to stay for five months, but I wasn't used to being a free person anymore. I had forgotten how to use the phone, the TV, the oven. Everything. It was like being born again.

I was traumatised by what I had seen in detention, but I was strong.

After five months they told me I had twenty-one days to find a place to live and a job. Until then I had not been allowed to work. I didn't know how to write a résumé and I didn't have a driver's licence."

What Betelham endured - no one should have to.

Eventually, Betelhem moved to Melbourne and that is when she arrived at our doors. Immediately our staff rallied around her and gave her a hot cooked meal, groceries and access to medical appointments and medications for her high blood pressure.

She also received English classes, support to write a resume that helped her get a job, as well as leadership training through the Community, Advocacy & Power Program.

Betelhem now works for Metro Trains and is proud to say that she is one of the first Ethiopian women employed in her role as a ticket inspector and announcer, and hopes to be a nurse one day.

“In detention they used to call me by my boat ID, ‘TAS 16’, but now my name tag says ‘Betelhem’. I have my identity back.”

Sabina Cruz, this is what your support enables. [Please donate if you can, so we can continue to support people just like Betelhem, people who are in detention right now and those who have been released with no pathway to permanency.](#)

Thank you for your compassion and belief in our cause and for being bold enough to support the work we do.

Blessings to you and your family,

Sabina



Sabina Cruz

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