

I'm not an activist, I'm not interested in challenging the government. I don't have an agenda I'm trying to promote, nor am I interested in self-promotion. I spent a year and a half working on Manus Island. I was Senior Education Officer in the Welfare Department. In some ways I had more insight into what was going on than many others, as a teacher and as a supervisor of expat and local staff. Also as a reasonably good Arabic speaker, and with enough Urdu to get by in, both important languages in the camp. I also have experience of many of the countries and cultures represented among the inmates. I came with an open mind. I wasn't against offshore processing in principle. I believe a just, quick and humane offshore processing system could work. But conditions on Manus are deliberately unjust, slow and inhumane. The suffering of the men is a calculated deterrent to others. Whatever the legality of the detention regime, it is morally wrong to make an innocent human being suffer to deter others from an action a government wishes to deter.

I don't need to give endless details here. I will touch on a few minor incidents to illustrate points, but I will not betray the confidence of the many men who have told me of serious violent or sexual abuse they have suffered as they did not want to report it, only to tell a sympathetic listener. However, should anyone care to know, Chauka and Charlie Compounds in the January to April 2015 period were particular hotspots of abuse, and I was reliably informed by several men, Lorengau Police station in the same period. During welfare checks I conducted some of the men showed me their severe bruising and swollen hands and other signs of what they had been through. Others never recovered after coming back from Lorengau and Chauka. I'm sure that those in government who have access to incident reports (though most of the abuse is unreported) have an idea of what life is like on Manus. Except for minor inaccuracies the press has presented a clear picture of what it is like to be interned there. There are far worse things than have so far appeared in the media as I'm sure it is difficult to find multiple sources, given the nature of the MIRPC. Few men from their cultures will, for instance, ever admit to being raped, though sexual assaults and exploitation are not uncommon on Manus. Nor is the sexual exploitation of Manusian women unusual at the MIRPC. In time a clearer picture of the abuse the men are experiencing will be known. Self-harm is also rife, and under reported. Dependence on psychiatric medication is growing, and few men know what they are taking. Drugs and locally distilled alcohol are freely available and many men are self-medicating to harmful levels with these. I have seen Australian staff taunting and provoking men on very many occasions, often aggressively. I have seen men reduced to uncontrollable crying, harming themselves, screaming or simply unable to get out of bed or speak for days on end due to bouts of despair, often following some humiliation at the hands of an expat. I did not write up incident reports for any of these for the same good reasons few of my colleagues do.

Only a few expats on Manus are inherently abusive, many more are just hot and irritated, working twenty-two hour shifts out of twenty-one days and prone to losing their tempers in a trying environment. A few of the asylum seekers are difficult to work with due to mental illness. I have been shouted at by asylum seekers, as well as expat staff showing signs of mental illness themselves due to stress and fatigue on a few occasions. It is a terrible environment to work in if you have a job that keeps you in the compounds. Often the people humiliating or witnessing the humiliation of asylum seekers do not even realise the effect their actions have. I've seen men pushed and called 'rag heads' or 'sand niggers' or subjected to other verbal abuse, often in the form of 'jokes'. In most of the cultures represented on Manus, public humiliation from someone in authority, even verbal, can cause severe psychological reactions. This is compounded by years of persecution many of the men have suffered in their home countries. The Arab Spring began after a Tunisian fruit vendor was publicly humiliated by an official and set fire to himself less than an hour later in public. Many expats may not actually realise how, even 'minor' events I have witnessed can be devastating to a vulnerable man, such as an Australian guard going to a man who was trying to escape his depression

by making origami animals out of coloured paper, stepping on the origami and laughing at him for being like a 'little girl'. I have also seen men (in Charlie compound) physically crowded and tapped on their bottoms in public by expat guards as a humiliating 'joke'. My point in this is that even expats who are not inherently abusive, due to their daily stress and the poor management of the MIRPC, end up causing severe harm. You might be interested in finding out about major assaults and not so interested in minor things, but a vulnerable man who almost daily suffers minor public humiliations over the period of a thousand days in a stiflingly hot and overcrowded compound is really experiencing an excruciating level of abuse due to the constant and open-ended (though 'minor') nature of that abuse.

To many in management the men are literally just items in a spreadsheet, they try to avoid interaction with them and speak often of them as if they were criminals. The dehumanisation is not dramatic, but it is pervasive and erosive. Anyone deviating from euphemistic language which depersonalises the men is instantly suspect and likely to be questioned and monitored for other signs of not having what the young and inexperienced managers term 'professional boundaries', but which can be as nothing more than feeling compassion or sympathy for the men. Many of the workers deemed lacking 'professional boundaries' are highly qualified professionals with decades of experience as case managers, educators, recreation and cultural officers, who are behaving in a conscientious and professional manner. However, the managers were generally unable to understand this. The managers I reported to (with one exception), including the many acting in the roles, were all in their mid-twenties and extremely inexperienced, incompetent and often using bullying tactics to cover their inadequacies. Many acquired their positions through cronyism and sought to bring their friends to Manus.

We do not say 'asylum seekers', we say 'transferees'. Although there has been an attempt by management to begin using names rather than 'BOAT IDs' to avoid external criticism, men are generally referred to using their numbers. A man who goes on hunger strike is referred to as 'missing three meals' or if he declares himself to be on hunger strike, is described as an FFR, which stands for 'Food and Fluid Refusal'. Although there was always a lot of banter describing how these men were faking it, this was clearly not true to those of us who knew the men. On my first day as a supervisor on Manus my manager told me that one of my tasks was to eavesdrop on staff, during private conversations and at meal times to help management stop the 'negativity'. Most of this 'negativity' was staff members processing by discussing in private the severe psychological or physical deterioration of men they worked with, or sharing accounts of some staff members who were engaging in abusive behaviours. This distancing language and toxic work environment further deepens the internal layers of secrecy on Manus, and enables further abuse. My manager was always asking me for 'positive' news to pass up to her manager.

Three innocent men have already died on Manus and I know others who have been close to death and far more who have changed beyond recognition in the time I have known them, from physical and mental illness caused by their imprisonment and sometimes from violence and torture at the hands of expat staff. Many of the security and welfare staff are good, professional people who carry out their duties with compassion. Unfortunately there are also a number who are at best opportunistic, callous, and unqualified, at worst racist, abusive and hateful. There are also many who think of their careers and turn a blind eye. The real problem is not whether there are good or bad individuals working on Manus, but the way in which the lack of external oversight and the atmosphere of secrecy and surveillance we work under means that abuse, in many forms, goes on on a daily basis. This is unfortunately part of human nature, in an environment with little oversight, an atmosphere of secrecy and power over vulnerable people. This is what we learn from institutional

settings. Think of the institutional sexual abuse of children in Australia and the stolen generations, or of the police persecution of gay men in the past. Victims and their allies were always trying to stop these horrors, but were sacked, silenced or ridiculed because the perpetrators and those with power and interest in maintaining the status quo were against them. One day the balance tips and now every reasonable person is on the side of these victims. Most people are not abusers but keep quiet because they fear the consequences. Manus is no different. One day, what is happening on Manus and Nauru will be seen in the same light as other shameful Australian instances of abuse. When the balance tips perception changes. However, right now it is impossible to get anything like a full picture of the general horror these innocent men are going through, or of the more specific issues which I absolutely promise you do exist, such as physical, sexual and psychological abuse. This is simply because most of the men live lives full of shame and depression. Very many have suffered torture and abuse in their home countries and some experienced terrible ordeals during their journeys from their home countries. Some are still unable to tell their families where they are or what they are going through. What the study of other victims of institutional abuse tells us is that survivors may or may not come forward to tell their stories. In this case abusers have the added protection that the men are seeking asylum in Australia so it is generally believed and promoted by government ministers that the men on Manus are liars. The secrecy that surrounds Manus and the mostly young and inexperienced men and women who manage the daily lives of these unfortunate men means that they are particularly vulnerable to many different kinds of abuse. Many suffer from PTSD and grew up in societies where the authorities and its agents are always to be feared. They see little point in reporting abuse as they believe that the purpose of the regime they are living under is to expose them to such abuse in order to force them to leave. They constantly weigh up their suffering on Manus with the fear of what could happen to them if they had to return to their home countries. That in itself is a terrible burden for any human being. A good number of them are stateless. Many have never felt safe in their lives, and they do not feel safe, nor are they safe on Manus, or being placed in PNG society. Survivors of institutional abuse can work to rebuild their lives and bear witness if they feel strong enough. However, there are no survivors on Manus yet, just anxious and despairing men trying to survive day by day.

Jessica Bloom

Senior Education Officer

Manus Island 2014-2016