

Athlete Mo Farah reveals he was trafficked illegally to the UK

Liz Smith
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Sir Mo Farah, the four-time Olympic gold medal athlete, recently revealed his real identity in a BBC/Red Bull Studios documentary, *The Real Mo Farah*. The programme details his journey on a false passport from war-torn Somaliland in northern Somalia to the UK when he was only nine years old in 1993.

The programme received a wide viewership with several million watching—an indication of the generally sympathetic response within the population to the plight of asylum seekers and refugees, particularly their children.

Farah revealed that his real name is Hussein Abdi Kahin. He was trafficked and held by his trafficker Nimco Farah in domestic servitude until he disclosed the abuse to his physical education teacher Alan Watkinson. Watkinson along with other teachers contacted social services who arranged for the boy to live with a schoolmate's mother, a Somali woman called Kinsi, who raised him as her own.

Watkinson's recognising of the immense talent that Farah had as a long-distance runner set him on a course that enabled him to win many local, national and international races, culminating in his astonishing medals haul at the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games. Last month Farah, aged 39, announced his retirement from track athletics, but he will run at the 2022 London Marathon in October.

In the film Watkinson notes, "The only language he seemed to understand was the language of PE and sport." Farah states, "The only thing I could do to get away from this [living situation] was to get out and run".

Watkinson did everything possible to ensure Farah secured British citizenship, which has granted in 2000 but only after what Watkinson described as a "long process".

The documentary details how Farah's father was killed by a ballistic missile while herding the family goats. Mo, at the time just four years old and a twin in a family of

nine, faced extreme destitution. Following his father's death, he was separated from his mother and moved to Djibouti with his twin brother to live with his uncle.

Farah details his troubled early years prior to his arrival in the UK and subsequently. Even when he was allowed to attend school at the age of 12, he struggled to fit in and had constant clashes with school authorities. Sarah Rennie, his form tutor at the time, explained, "When Mo came to the school, we had very confused messages about his past. We were having meeting after meeting trying to discover and work out exactly what his background was. As time went on, we had incredible behaviour difficulties with Mo across the school, and we needed to speak to somebody."

They became more worried as the people he was staying with never turned up. Farah was questioned many times but became adept at avoidance as he was facing constant threats from his trafficker.

In one of the most moving parts of the documentary Farah and his son return to Somaliland to meet his birth mother and family. As Farah's athletics profile widened a chance meeting occurred in the restaurant where Farah had worked with a friend of his mother, Aisha, in Somaliland. She asked Farah's real name, showed him a photo of his mother and gave him a cassette from her.

Recalling events Farah states, "It wasn't just a tape... It was more of a voice - and then it was singing sad songs for me, like poems or like traditional song, you know. And I would listen to it for days, weeks." One side of the tape had a phone number on it, asking him to call but with the caveat, "If this is a bother or causing you trouble, don't—just leave it—you don't have to contact me." Farah tells the film, "I'm going, 'Of course I want to contact you'."

Farah's revelations could have put his family at great risk. While assured by their barrister that his wife and children were safe, the decision on Farah's legal status to

reside in Britain rested with the Home Office as his nationality was technically “obtained by fraud or misrepresentations”. Within days the Home Office assured the Farah family that no further action would be taken.

Farah’s life story could be told thousands of times over. But there is no such happy ending for many of the thousands of children and families who arrived undocumented fleeing war and destitution.

It is only the fact that Mo Farah, due to his remarkable athletic abilities, is now a “national treasure,” knighted by the queen, that saved him. If anyone else from Farah’s background had revealed how their arrival in the UK was illegal, they would have been immediately arrested and booted out of Britain, bundled on the first available deportation flight available.

Following the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia large numbers, particularly women and children, sought refuge in the UK. Between 1985 and 2006, Somalis figured among the top 10 largest country of origin groups of people seeking asylum in the UK.

According to research, “Post-Conflict Identities: Practices and Affiliations of Somali Refugee Children”, released in August 2005 by the Economic and Social Research Council, many Somali refugees fled to a neighbouring country such as Kenya or Ethiopia before migrating to the UK. Whatever migration channel they took often proved hazardous. Those fleeing had to make difficult, terrible choices like leaving behind family members who could not travel and who stayed in refugee camps.

The research noted, “Somali asylum seekers arriving in the UK have thus often had to take desperate decisions in order to survive.”

Although extremely limited, at the time this research was conducted there was a National Asylum Support Service in place, assisting with basic aspects of settlement and immigration status.

Even this paltry level of support has been obliterated in the last decade with the rolling out by the Home Office in 2012 of its “hostile environment” policy. In 2014 the Home Office introduced a “deport first, appeal second” policy. A September 2020 Institute for Public Policy Research report found the policy had “contributed to forcing many people into destitution, has helped to foster racism and discrimination, and has erroneously affected people with the legal right to live and work in the UK”. In June this year the Supreme Court ruled that the brutal policy was unlawful.

Yet the anti-immigration agenda has only accelerated, with the introduction of the government’s Migration and Development Partnership deal between the UK and Rwanda. According to the agreement, anyone deemed to have arrived “irregularly” in the UK since January 1, 2022 may be relocated to Rwanda. Once in Rwanda, if an asylum application is deemed legitimate, the person will only be allowed to stay in Rwanda, not the UK. If not, they will be deported to a third country.

Under Home Secretary Priti Patel’s New Plan for Immigration, it is expected that tens of thousands of people will be flown to Rwanda and, eventually, other states the UK finalises outsourcing agreements with. In breach of international law, unaccompanied children and families are being treated just as brutally, with growing numbers of children being incorrectly age assessed, putting them at risk.

The situation facing undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers will only worsen under whoever takes over the reins as prime minister in September. Conservative leadership candidate and favourite Liz Truss pledged in a hustings Wednesday, “I would support and extend the Rwanda policy to more countries but also I would make sure in British law that we can’t be overruled by the ECHR [European Court of Human Rights] so we are able to protect our borders.”

In the period that Farah made his fame and fortune, tens of thousands of children and their families fleeing war and devastation were not so fortunate. Today many reside in Britain’s poorest areas eking out an existence not a world away from the conditions they have left, and who live in constant fear of being branded “illegal” immigrants and deported back to war-torn and poverty stricken countries.

The Real Mo Farah can be viewed by UK residents here for a further 11 months.



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