# Shahala the knitter

# *“Without hope life is impossible. Even a false hope is better than no hope.”*

***Shahala, 50 years old, was a schoolteacher in Mahamat (Iran/Kurdistan). As a Kurdish activist against the Iranian government, she joined demonstrations against price rises, which were suppressed with violence by Iranian state forces. After she and her husband got divorced, and he got custody of their children (6 and 9 years old), he reported her for being an activist. So, she fled her country. Interview by Shahsavar Rahman on 30 November 2020, when she had been in the UK for 8 months, having claimed asylum. Since this interview she has been granted leave to remain, her husband has agreed to let her children come to the UK, and she is active on Facebook and Instagram helping other asylum seekers and refugees.***

I have two children I left at home. I hope to be reunited with them soon and forever.

I am grateful I am now safe in a country that respects human rights. But during quarantine I have had no one to care for me. I am living in a shared house with housemates from Saudi Arabia, Albania, Afghanistan. We cannot communicate because we can’t speak English.

I try to keep busy watching You Tube to learn some English. Sometimes I go out to meet people but still my main problem is language, not speaking English. If anything happens to me, I can’t defend myself or speak out. I was a teacher, but here, without English all my experience is worth nothing.

I often had to go shopping, walking so far, in bad weather, sometimes I was crying. I got ill from the cold and wet. I have stomach problems and it’s worse when I’m stressed. When I tried to speak to my GP on the phone, they couldn’t understand me. They didn’t provide Language Line. I walked 25 minutes in bad weather to the surgery, but they didn’t let me in. I went to the pharmacy and tried to use body language to show that I have a bad stomach. They were kind but they said I had to buy medicine for £12, too much.

One day when I got my allowance, I shopped enough for two weeks. My bags were so heavy. I saw an abandoned trolley and put my shopping in it. But it capsized. Everything fell down. My eggs broke and went over everything, the bags all split. I was crying bitterly and loudly, no English language, and I am 50 years old and ill! I wanted someone to listen to me but there was no one there for me.

The house manager never came to see us after lockdown. The house was full of rubbish, my housemates are careless young girls, they don’t care about hygiene. I cleaned the house and took out all the rubbish. I took me 2 days. I put the rubbish out in a bin on the street, but it was the wrong bin. The neighbour called the police. I thought people would praise me! The police did provide Language Line, so I understood. I was very ashamed. I was crying again that time.

That neighbour woman was unkind, she had no understanding. The police said to stay at home, but I told them I had to keep the house clean. A dirty house is worse than Covid.

I try to stay strong and positive. I’m good at knitting. I bought some material and made lots of hats. I gave some to my housemates as gifts, and I sold some in a Kurdish shop

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I always cook Kurdish traditional food and the housemates love it. And when the Albanian young lady got sick, and the GP said she should isolate for two weeks, I looked after her like my daughter till she got better. She was very grateful and it felt great that I could help someone. We became very good friends.

To the British government and the Home Office, I want to say:

*I’m very grateful to you for giving us shelter, but please invite us to interview and consider our cases, as soon as possible. I want to live here like everyone, to work and contribute. If I can work again as I used to, I can feel good about myself. Work can help me avoid stress. It’s not just about money. It’s human nature.*

Hope is very important for life. Without that, life is almost impossible. We need a mirage – even a false hope is better than no hope.

I read in the news about a 90-year-old lady who got her PhD. That’s why I never give up.