

The History of Identity Documentation in
European Nations: HIDDEN network
CA21120

**‘Home, Identity and the Politics of
Belonging: Reading *I Don’t Want to Talk
About Home* Through the Lens of Identity
Documentation’**

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COST Action CA21120 chair, October 2026.**





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Title: 'Home, Identity and the Politics of Belonging: Reading I Don't Want to Talk About Home Through the Lens of Identity Documentation', 2026.

In [Suad Aldarra's](#) award winning memoir *[I Don't Want to Talk About Home: A Migrant's Search for Belonging](#)*, the central question is not simply where home is, but who has the power to define belonging. The memoir follows Aldarra's journey from Saudi Arabia to Syria, Egypt, the United States and ultimately Ireland, examining displacement, migration, gender, memory and the emotional costs of crossing borders. Yet it also implicitly raises another question: what role do documents, citizenship regimes and state bureaucracies play in determining whose stories count and whose mobility is permitted? In the book, we learn of the different paths Suad and her now husband Housam have to take because they each possess different documents, based on their birth and heritage. The inherent chance, the luck, good and bad, that emanates from these different circumstances raises questions about inequities that are inherent in laws around the world, but why do they exist? These were questions I was interested in exploring when I wrote the grant that created HIDDEN: The history of identity documentation in European nations, a network funded by the [European Cooperation in Science and Technology](#) organisation (CA21120).

These questions all poured into the application, which became the Memorandum of Understanding for the COST grant that created the *[History of Identity Documentation in European Nations: Citizenship, Nationality and Migration \(HIDDEN, CA21120\)](#)*. The HIDDEN project argues that identity documentation is not merely administrative paperwork but a powerful social technology that shapes citizenship, migration, access to rights and experiences of belonging. It seeks to connect historical and contemporary forms of identity documentation with lived experiences, particularly those of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and stateless people. This is why, in June 2024, I invited Suad to attend a [Policy Roundtable at NTNU Brussels campus](#) (thanks to [Prof Michael Geary](#), co-leader of WG3 who hosted us at his university's satellite campus) which brought together policy makers, academics and those with lived experience to discuss the challenges, current research on and future directions in Europe for accessing

citizenship (documented by attendees Elizabeth Challinor and Gizem Alioglu Cakmak in [a blog you can find here](#)). At that event I had the pleasure of interviewing her, which was followed by a reading from the book. This was an important part of the event, giving literal voice to the experience of forced migration and the challenges that documentation poses depending on the kind that one possesses. The 'strength' of passports in facilitating mobility is ranked each year by different companies, an idea I explored further [in a piece for the Memory, Mind and Media](#) special issue edited by HIDDEN members (more on that below).

In many ways, Suad's story connects with the themes explored in the [different working groups](#), most especially WG5 Human Stories for Humane Reactions. It was as a result of this event that Suad joined HIDDEN as a member, fulfilling our mandate to include and listen to those with lived experience. The memoir has gone on to win multiple awards, demonstrating the high public interest in personal narratives of migration. Suad was featured again as an example of HIDDEN's work at the final event held at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, an event called [Art, Migration and the Politics of Belonging](#), in September 2026 where she drew a large crowd. The final event was a collaborative, co-created and co-curated event with the Education Department of the [National Gallery of Ireland](#), fulfilling the original vision for HIDDEN that its work would be showcased in a final event that was public-facing, showcasing art as a way to better understand and engage with the contemporary challenges of migration, a global phenomenon that attracts much public commentary.

Throughout the lifespan of the network, Working Group 6, our 'Dissemination and communication' team, have tried to find different ways to reach out to the public, to find different ways to promote empathy when trying to understand the challenges that migrants and refugees may face. This has involved [social media posts](#) dedicated to highlighting stories, art and testimonies from refugees, [newsletters](#), the production of a podcast, [Transit: Stories of Movement and Meaning](#) and finally, the production of an animation based on Suad's book, which she kindly gave permission to do. You can view [this on our website here](#). The animation produced by Outburst Design, helps to fulfil the network's mandate to find publicly accessible and educational ways to communicate the core research of this large group of researchers approaching the issues of identity

documentation, citizenship and migration from different disciplines and personal vantage points. Many within the network have lived experience of migration, including the experience of statelessness and being a refugee and they brought this knowledge and experience to the different events and outputs HIDDEN has produced, and will continue to produce, as the last outputs are published.

Figure 1: Still from Home, Identity and the Politics of Belonging HIDDEN COST Action CA21120 [Animation](#)



The animation is a synopsis of the key challenges that Aldarra faced when it came to identity documents and reveals the deep connections between a micro-history, one person's story, and a large academic network such as HIDDEN. Identity documents in this animation are that grew to 348 registered members by the end of the network (2022-2026). Overall, HIDDEN involved 215 women and 120 men (with a further 13 people either not specifying their gender or preferring not to say). The largest country representation in the network was Ireland (59 members), unsurprising given that the Action was hosted at Maynooth University and held many of its events in Ireland. This was followed by Türkiye (47) and the United Kingdom (39). The full breakdown of countries is given in **Table 1** below.

Table 1: HIDDEN network member breakdown by country and %, October 2026 (N=348)

Rank	Country	Participants	Percentage
1	Ireland	59	17.0%
2	Türkiye	47	13.5%
3	United Kingdom	39	11.2%
4	Not specified	16	4.6%
5	Italy	16	4.6%
6	Spain	16	4.6%
7	Portugal	15	4.3%
8	Belgium	10	2.9%
9	Germany	10	2.9%
10	Malta	9	2.6%
11	Netherlands	8	2.3%
12	Greece	8	2.3%
13	France	8	2.3%
14	Albania	8	2.3%
15	Serbia	7	2.0%
16	North Macedonia	7	2.0%
17	Croatia	6	1.7%
18	Sweden	5	1.4%
19	Slovenia	4	1.1%
20	Poland	4	1.1%
21	Norway	4	1.1%
22	Slovakia	3	0.9%
23	Ukraine	3	0.9%
24	Georgia	3	0.9%
25	Austria	3	0.9%
26	Bosnia & Herzegovina	3	0.9%
27	Czechia	3	0.9%
28	Switzerland	2	0.6%
29	United States	2	0.6%
30	Israel	2	0.6%
31	Finland	2	0.6%
32	Moldova	2	0.6%
33	Cyprus	2	0.6%
34	Montenegro	2	0.6%
35	Romania	2	0.6%
36	Lithuania	2	0.6%
37	Hungary	1	0.3%
38	Estonia	1	0.3%
39	Azerbaijan	1	0.3%
40	Denmark	1	0.3%
41	Kosovo*	1	0.3%
42	Luxembourg	1	0.3%
Total		348	100%

The country profiles hide another layer of ethnic or geographic diversity as many of our members are living and working in countries they were not born in, thus the network had a much larger reach than might appear in the data at first glance.

Home Beyond Geography

One of the most striking themes in Suad Aldarra's memoir is the instability of home. The book rejects simplistic understandings of home as a fixed geographical location. Instead, home emerges as a complex emotional and social construct shaped by memory, family, language and loss. As [Penguin's description notes](#), the work is ultimately 'about the enduring love for a home that ceased to exist and how to build a life out of the rubble'.

This understanding of home aligns closely with contemporary migration scholarship. Scholars such as [Avtar Brah](#) (in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*) have argued that home is simultaneously a place of origin, a lived experience and an imaginative space. Similarly, [Seyla Benhabib](#)'s work on migration and political membership highlights how migrants continually negotiate belonging within systems that distinguish between citizens and non-citizens. HIDDEN explicitly identifies this tension between universal human rights and state sovereignty as a central challenge in contemporary Europe. As I wrote in the MOU: 'HIDDEN addresses the dynamics of power this issue raises in a critically engaged way by paying particular attention to the historical antecedents to modern identity documentation processes'. We have done this in various ways now, but the work throughout the network has always used personal experiences and stories as a way to highlight these complex issues. Suad Aldarra's memoir therefore offers something that policy documents and migration statistics often cannot: an account of how displacement feels. It demonstrates that migration is not solely a movement across territory but also a continuous process of negotiating identity, recognition and memory.

Documents as Gatekeepers of Belonging

The HIDDEN network places identity documentation at the centre of citizenship and mobility. Passports, birth certificates, visas, vaccination certificates (especially in the Covid era) and digital identifiers are tools that determine access to rights, services and movement. The project explicitly argues that identity documents shape everyday life for migrants and non-migrants alike, and this can be noted in the Memorandum of Understanding which describes the project goals and funding agreement.¹

Aldarra's narrative illustrates this reality at a deeply personal level. Her ability to migrate legally was linked to educational credentials and employment opportunities, while others facing similar circumstances were constrained by different documentary

¹ The Memorandum of Understanding is available to view on the official COST page dedicated to the HIDDEN network, <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA21120/> [Accessed 10th August 2026].

realities. The memoir repeatedly demonstrates that movement is never simply about personal desire or need; it is mediated through bureaucratic mechanisms that determine who may cross borders and under what conditions, and who may not.²

This observation echoes the work of sociologist [John Torpey](#), who argued in *The Invention of the Passport* that modern states increasingly monopolised the legitimate means of movement by controlling identification systems. Similarly, [David Lyon](#)'s work on surveillance demonstrates how identification documents operate as mechanisms of state monitoring and social classification. Both authors are cited within the HIDDEN framework as foundational thinkers for understanding the historical development of identification regimes. This is exemplified in the animation created as a way of communicating some of the core themes in Aldarra's work that resonate with the network's scholarly motivations

The Birthright Lottery and Unequal Mobility

A particularly useful concept for interpreting Aldarra's memoir is [Ayelet Shachar](#)'s notion of the 'birthright lottery'. Shachar argues that citizenship is, in many respects, an inherited asset distributed unequally at birth, profoundly influencing an individual's life chances – as such there can be citizenship inequalities based on nothing but chance. The [HIDDEN memorandum](#) explicitly adopts this concept, noting that the documents one possesses depend largely on hereditary entitlements determined by birthplace, nationality and family history. In writing this grant, I explicitly reflected on the social justice implications of citizenship and nationality laws whereby some people (such as myself) have access to more than one passport while others are stateless or without access to any form of identity document. Aldarra's account vividly demonstrates this inequality. Although she ultimately secured opportunities unavailable to many Syrians displaced by conflict, her narrative continually highlights the arbitrariness of these distinctions. The emotional burden of being categorised, stereotyped and reduced to one's nationality reveals how profoundly geopolitical circumstance shape personal identity. As commentators on the memoir have observed, Aldarra challenges the tendency to treat migrants as a homogeneous category and instead foregrounds the complexity of individual experiences. I reflected on this further in work for the HIDDEN network in the Reflection referred to above for the journal *Memory, Mind and Media* which was co-edited by [Ana Belén Martínez García](#), [Monika Arnez](#), [Anita Lunić](#) called 'Navigating migration, memory and media'.³

Gender, Citizenship and Recognition

Another significant point of connection between Aldarra's memoir and HIDDEN concerns gender. The memoir reflects on growing up within restrictive gender norms

² For more on the book see the official Penguin website <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/447459/i-dont-want-to-talk-about-home-by-aldarra-suad/9781529177138> [Accessed 10th August 2026].

³

and on the intersection between patriarchy, migration and social belonging. Aldarra describes how expectations surrounding womanhood shaped her experiences long before displacement entered her life.⁴ This chimes with [my own research](#) which has been in the field of women's and gender history, primarily on the migration of Irish women to Britain in the twentieth century, which has evolved into inquiries into the documents that made this possible and reveal to historians the diversity within this migrant cohort that has yet to be fully explored. The rich archives that allow historians to reconstruct lives determined and shaped by access to identity documentation are echoed and enhanced by personal narratives such as Suad's. Her testimony will be used in years to come to chart the realities of forced migration for Syrians over the past decade. Such personalised stories are of equal importance to archival holdings in tracing the realities of these experiences and reach the public in different ways than traditional scholarship. This is why personal testimonies were specifically noted in the MOU and why a working group was dedicated to them – [Working Group 5, Human Stories for Humane Reactions](#). WG 5 aimed to find ways to create more empathic reactions to these groups in European societies, which respond to and embrace the unsettling nuances and complexities of their stories in ways that break down stereotypical classifications of migrants. Suad Aldarra's story fits with this aim because despite coming from a war-torn country she was never forced to apply for asylum as a refugee. She used tourist and work visas to migrate to different countries, leveraging her education and skills to get better opportunities in other countries and sponsoring her husband as part of her visa application. This is a different path than many had, and it is important to recognise the core skills that migrants often bring with them from their homelands.

Gender has also been central to the HIDDEN research agenda. The memorandum highlights how citizenship laws have historically differentiated between men and women through rules governing nationality transmission, marriage and access to legal status. It draws attention to scholarship by [Nira Yuval-Davis](#), [Betty de Hart](#) and others who demonstrate that citizenship is never gender neutral.⁵ Reading Aldarra alongside this literature reveals that migration experiences are always shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including gender, ability, class, religion, ethnicity, nationality and race. The memoir serves as a reminder that bureaucratic systems are experienced by embodied individuals whose social identities affect how laws and policies operate in practice. In the animation, Aldarra's experience of being refused entry to an exam

⁴ Some of these themes can be noted in the review of Aldarra's book by Ammar Azzouz for the *The Markaz Review*, November 2023, available at <https://themarkaz.org/i-dont-want-to-talk-about-home/> [accessed 10th August 2023].

⁵ For further discussion of citizenship theory and debates particularly in relation to women, see, for example, Nira Yuval Davis 'Women, Citizenship and Difference', *Feminist Review*, No. 57, Autumn 1997, pp.4-27 and her book of the same year, *Gender and Nation*. See also Ruth Lister, 'Citizenship: Towards a Feminist Synthesis', *Feminist Review*, No. 57, Autumn 1997, pp.28-48.

because she did not have the right paperwork is an example of how such bureaucratic systems work in tandem with each other, sometimes limiting opportunities that seemingly have no bearing on citizenship status (such as the right to further qualifications as in this example). This is why this episode from the book was chosen to be featured in the animation – a small but important exemplar of how documents can either open or close doors to opportunities. Aldarra's experience is also resonant of some academic work specifically on female migrants and how the act of migration can often free women from gendered constraints. As Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky argued 'Migration also offers women and men the opportunity to transgress gender roles, which is especially important for women who are usually under greater constraints than men'.⁶ While that observation was made twenty years ago, it seems that it has not dated. Aldarra found work in an area where women are still the minority and migration broadened her experiences in male dominated industries.

Finally, a focus on gender can be seen in the leadership of the Action and in the profile of its members. Table 2 gives a breakdown of the HIDDEN participants by gender and country.

Table 2: Gender breakdown of HIDDEN network by participating countries

Country	Female	Male	Not specified	Prefer not to say
Albania	7	1	0	0
Austria	3	0	0	0
Azerbaijan	0	1	0	0
Belgium	5	5	0	0
Bosnia & Herzegovina	2	1	0	0
Croatia	4	2	0	0
Cyprus	1	1	0	0
Czechia	2	1	0	0
Denmark	1	0	0	0
Estonia	0	1	0	0
Finland	1	1	0	0
France	4	4	0	0
Georgia	2	1	0	0
Germany	6	4	0	0
Greece	6	2	0	0
Hungary	1	0	0	0
Ireland	34	24	0	1
Israel	1	1	0	0
Italy	14	2	0	0
Kosovo*	0	1	0	0

⁶ Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky, 'Crossing Boundaries and Making Connections', pp. 1-35 in Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky (eds.) *Women, Migration and Citizenship: Making Local, National and Transnational Connections*. Ashgate: Aldershot, 2006, 23.

Lithuania	1	1	0	0
Luxembourg	0	1	0	0
Malta	4	5	0	0
Moldova	2	0	0	0
Montenegro	1	1	0	0
Netherlands	7	1	0	0
North Macedonia	7	0	0	0
Norway	3	1	0	0
Not specified	7	1	8	0
Poland	2	2	0	0
Portugal	11	2	0	2
Romania	2	0	0	0
Serbia	4	3	0	0
Slovakia	1	2	0	0
Slovenia	3	1	0	0
Spain	9	7	0	0
Sweden	1	4	0	0
Switzerland	2	0	0	0
Türkiye	28	19	0	0
Ukraine	2	1	0	0
United Kingdom	22	15	0	2
United States	2	0	0	0

The diverse locations of the scholars meant that HIDDEN events were always infused with a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences with women having a strong role in leading and participating in discussions.

Human Stories for Humane Reactions

Perhaps the strongest overlap between *I Don't Want to Talk About Home* and the HIDDEN COST Action lies in their shared commitment to narrative. HIDDEN's Working Group 5, Human Stories for Humane Reactions, argues that personal testimonies can create more empathetic public understandings of migration and citizenship. It seeks to move beyond abstract debates by centring lived experience. Aldarra's memoir accomplishes precisely this task. Rather than presenting migration through statistics, crises or policy frameworks, it offers a nuanced account of loneliness, resilience, cultural adaptation and emotional survival. In doing so, it challenges dominant narratives that reduce migrants to either victims or threats. These sources are readily available and have been used by many of the scholars in the different groups to reflect on everything from migration to statelessness, but they only tell one part of the story, or give a singular angle on what are often complex journeys and experiences.

This approach has particular significance in contemporary Europe, where migration debates are frequently shaped by misinformation and polarisation. As the HIDDEN

memorandum observes, depersonalised narratives about migrants obscure the historical realities of mobility and hinder social inclusion. Personal testimony therefore becomes not merely an autobiographical act but an intervention to rebalance debates that are sometimes skewed towards a negative depiction of migration without a consideration of either the benefits or the international human rights obligations.

Conclusion

Taken together, Suad Aldarra's *I Don't Want to Talk About Home* and the HIDDEN project invite us to rethink the relationship between identity, citizenship and belonging. Aldarra's memoir supplies the human voice behind issues often discussed in legal, political or administrative terms, while HIDDEN provides the historical and theoretical frameworks that explain why such experiences occur. The essential HIDDEN themes can be seen in the short animation produced about Aldarra's book: migration, forced and volitional, agency, belonging and rejection are all themes that have occurred in the work of HIDDEN and its member Suad Aldarra. In reading Aldarra's book we are reminded once again that identity documents are never simply pieces of paper or digital credentials. They are instruments through which states recognise, classify and sometimes exclude people. More importantly, both demonstrate that behind every passport, visa or citizenship application lies a human story shaped by memory, family, loss and hope. In an era increasingly defined by biometric identification, digital surveillance and contested borders, these insights are more relevant than ever. Understanding migration requires not only analysing systems of documentation but also listening carefully to those whose lives are shaped by them. That, ultimately, is the shared intellectual and ethical contribution of both Aldarra's memoir and the HIDDEN network. As we come to the end of our work in 2026, we have entered a new era for the management of migration and asylum in Europe in the form of the [EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), it is important to highlight the personal, the human, and the humane, in our understandings of modern migration. HIDDEN has taken up this challenge in various ways, with a book dedicated to analysing the Pact due to be released in 2027, [The European Union's Pact on Migration and Asylum: A Fresh Start?](#), published by Hart/Bloomsbury.

Ideas for using the animation

The [animation](#) has been produced as an accessible way to understand the research that academics within the HIDDEN network are known for. As such, it can be enjoyed simply as a snapshot of the memoir, *I Don't Want to Talk About Home* which addresses the war in Syria and the migration crisis it provoked as well as the strategies that can be used by migrants to flee war conditions and establish lives elsewhere. It can also be used as a teaching tool at different educational levels. This chimes with one of the aims of the HIDDEN network to provoke more educational conversations about the challenge of migration in Europe by using personal stories and examples to humanise this

experience. This was also something that Suad Aldarra worked on in her academic research in the field of data science. Her MA thesis, which tackled the spreading issue of misinformation about refugees and migrants in the news, won several awards and international recognition [and can be found here](#). The word clouds created by Aldarra in this work could be used to promote conversations linked to the animation and one or more of the 535 works noted in [the HIDDEN bibliography](#). At primary or second level, the animation could be used as a resource for classes in the curriculum that engage in education about citizenship and the wider world. It could also be paired with exploring one of the other artistic pieces noted in the [Art Repository on the HIDDEN site](#) (there are over 100 examples to choose from). Finally, the animation could be used in analysing storytelling, biography and autobiography, engaging with it as a response to a longer written piece and analysing the ways it does and does not capture Aldarra's wider story.

Sources and further reading:

Over 500 readings are available on the HIDDEN website here: <https://hidden-costaction.eu/bibliography/>

Suad Aldarra, *I Don't Want to Talk About Home* (Penguin):

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/447459/i-dont-want-to-talk-about-home-by-aldarra-suad/9781529177138> [penguin.co.uk]

John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*:

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Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*: <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/gender-and-nation/book204207>