

## SHELTERING THE OVERLOOKED: DIVERSITY AND DISTRESS BEYOND THE PUBLIC EYE

Some memories return not as stories but as flashbacks for me: the mild smell of Sanytol and rubbing alcohol that clung to everything, the echo of footsteps in an events hall turned shelter, or the low mumbling and shouting of frustration in eight different languages. By mid-March 2020, Spain declared a state of emergency, and from 15 March to 21 June, we were confined to our homes under strict nationwide lockdown—a total of 99 days. Volunteering with the Red Cross in Barcelona during the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020 was one of those memories that does not line up aptly into chapters. It exists in fragments—chaos, warmth, fatigue—and yet, when I look back, I realise those fragments altered how I approach intercultural relations and responsiveness amidst crisis, all while enrolled in my Research Masters. The memories in their entirety were intense, emotionally taxing, and transformative, offering a lens into human resilience, intercultural interactions, and crisis management under unprecedented circumstances. This is not a chronological report of six months. It's merely an attempt to mount together pieces: the early chaos of setting up temporary shelters, the complex social dynamics that arise when cultural norms, expectations, and habits intersect under stress, the small adjustments that created peace, and the lessons I still carry about dignity and interculturality.

### ENTERING THE EMERGENCY

In the beginning, nothing felt prepared. And that's because nobody in Spain was prepared for a pandemic of such magnitude to restrict us. The temporary shelters were improvised spaces: education centres, large venues like FIRA, and eventually expanded to other facilities across the city.





The setup was simple but overwhelming—rows of cots, plastic dividers, disinfectant dispensers, and a stream of people arriving with bags, fear, and at times, hostility. My role shifted constantly. One day I was preparing welcome packs with sheets and toiletries, another day I was taking temperatures, then suddenly I was posted at the sign-in desk or checking bags for security. The team was a patchwork of trained Red Cross staff, seasoned volunteers, and others who—like me—had never been in a crisis of this scale. We all wanted to help, but our approaches varied. Some adopted a tone of authority, sometimes unconsciously, while others were swallowed by the emotional weight of it all. I observed and took down mental notes of everything, especially their interactions with those users of the facilities. The shelter population was equally diverse: homeless Spaniards, migrants without documents, stranded tourists, and individuals from across Europe and Latin America. The urgency of the pandemic created a strange levelling effect—we were all at risk—yet hierarchy seeped in through class, language, and assumptions. I noticed quickly how volunteers changed tone depending on whom they addressed. A Spanish speaker with a steady job history received a different response than a migrant struggling with broken Catalan. In parallel, I encountered a Catalan homeless user who refused to address me because I did not speak Catalan – And when nobody was around to translate, I scrambled to mimic the commands I had observed from a coordinator, who had assisted them previously, so that the user would listen and let me take their temperature.

For me, this phase was an early lesson in the intersections of power and communication. I wanted to remain objective, but I could not ignore how dignity was distributed unevenly. Every conversation carried more weight than I expected. I quickly became aware of the complex social dynamics at play.

People from different backgrounds—migrants, homeless individuals, and temporary residents—shared the same space, often unfamiliar with one another’s cultural norms. Conflicts flared over small misunderstandings: a raised voice, a misread gesture, or a queue for a meal. I observed the delicate balancing act required to maintain safety and dignity, both for the residents and the volunteers. At times, simply standing by to mediate a potential fight or offering a quiet explanation in another language was as crucial as distributing food or checking temperatures. I initially signed up as a volunteer in late winter, as I had been someone to receive aide and support from charitable bodies in my youth – I have always had this innate feeling that it was somehow my duty to help others, especially those limited due to lack of resources and no knowledge of how to come up from their situation. I feel that many of us who experience traumatic situations, can find ourselves unable to move past our own pain, unless we cross paths with others who are willing to share their story and how they overcame it. Others are not so fortunate, and I am aware of this. Some of us simply get lucky and receive an extended hand by someone generous. I tell myself to be as impartial as possible and to be that someone for anyone while adhering to protocol.

## COMMUNICATION & CULTURAL CLASHES

When I recall these moments, I'd say the middle phase was perhaps the hardest. By then, routines were in place, but tensions ran deeper. I picked up shifts at the FIRA and was no longer at the pop-up shelter in the education building. The month is April now, and Ramadan had started. Quite a few of the shelter users were Muslim migrants, and as the holy month began, it became obvious that no adjustments had been made. Pork appeared in meals, fasting was not considered, and mealtimes clashed with the hours when fasts were broken. Language barriers only deepened the frustration, and resentment grew. I recognised what was happening because of my own background. Being half Bahraini, I had the opportunity to meet my Bahraini family in 2018 and even stayed through Ramadan and had studied Arabic prior.



Being there allowed me to pick up on their dialect. I was not an expert in theology, but I knew enough to see the oversight. So, after overthinking on whether it was really my place or not to step in, I stepped in: I spoke to the head coordinator about helping draft a meal schedule in Spanish and Arabic, translating conversations where possible, and raising the concern with the shelter director. It was a small act, but it mattered. I felt that it mattered. The atmosphere somewhat eased, and users began to feel that their beliefs were respected. The simple gestures of being in the food line and telling them what they could eat in Arabic, I personally felt gave them back some of their dignity. I asked myself, is this degrading or are these just how things are, and I am sitting now from a point of privilege? I had been on the other side as a child, as I mentioned (not during a pandemic though), and really aimed to be kind and caring. This experience taught me something crucial: cultural sensitivity in crisis is not optional. A meal is never just a meal. Served at the wrong time, or with the wrong ingredients, it becomes a symbol of disregard. In those weeks, I learned that intercultural awareness is not abstract—it is survival, dignity, and sometimes the difference between conflict and coexistence. At the same time, I became acutely aware of my own limits. I was trying to be a cultural bridge, but also a neutral volunteer, and at times a social scientist observing social dynamics. That balancing act was mentally taxing. I often asked myself: Was I really helping, or projecting my own assumptions? Was I respecting boundaries, or overstepping? Holding these questions was part of the work.

## BUILDING TEMPORARY PEACE

As time passed, the shelters adapted. The Red Cross implemented additional small changes, including additional resources from the government. We had the military come to help us with cooking and surveillance watch. I noticed a drastic change over the following months.



A fenced-off smoking area, a corner for football matches, makeshift exercise equipment, even simple activities like English classes or board games. These interventions were modest, yet I felt they created breathing room and change all within a confined space. I alternated constantly between practical and relational roles. On some days, I handed out food or checked temperatures. On others, I found myself trying to mediate disputes that escalated quickly—sometimes from nothing more than a look or a misunderstanding. Inside confinement, with the virus outside as a constant, invisible threat, nerves were raw. Yet alongside the conflicts, I witnessed resilience. People began to form support networks: translating for one another, sharing cigarettes, or helping newcomers navigate the rules. Some volunteers, despite their lack of training, developed remarkable patience. I learned from them as much as from any official protocol or social worker as they dealt with personal situations testing their own limitations. It was during this phase that I realised how dignity can be upheld through the smallest of details. A football match was not just a distraction; it was a way to remember humanity. Respectful tone in a conversation was not a courtesy; it was an act of resistance against hierarchy. I felt that the users of the shelter were subject to a hierarchy in which compliance with the rules determined whether they could stay. Yet, because of the lockdown, everyone was required to remain indoors, creating a Catch-22: autonomy was limited, but so too were the options for leaving or resisting the structure.

## LESSONS AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Looking back, I see how emotionally taxing it was to be part of this work. I had entered thinking I could keep a balance between action and observation. But the truth is, I carried home the tension and the stories. I struggled to set boundaries. I often lay awake asking myself whether I had done enough, or whether I had missed something important. I struggled to sleep and cringed at comments from other students joking about mask protocols or flouting them in indoor gatherings later. They hadn't had the same experience, so I had to constantly excuse myself or mentally check-out in order to avoid getting into arguments with them. The experience shaped me in a way that I learned that communication in crisis is not only about words—it is about tone, timing, gestures, and an awareness of cultural context. I learned that teamwork means letting go of ego: trained or untrained, everyone had something to contribute, and mistakes were inevitable. And most of all, I learned that care requires humility.

If I faced a similar situation again, I would speak up earlier when cultural needs were overlooked. I would advocate for intercultural training as part of emergency response just as much as psychosocial training. And I would pay more attention to my own boundaries—because exhaustion helps no one. I realised that getting back to a more positive state of mind required more time.

## **WHY THE MEMORY MATTERS**

The world has largely moved on from the pandemic. Most prefer not to revisit those days of confinement, fear, and uncertainty. However, I cannot leave the memory behind. For me, the shelters remain a lesson in how crisis exposes both our fragility and our capacity for resilience. I myself even tested positive for COVID-19 three times, and was hospitalised for it in one instance. I was involved in an accident and out of duty, unable to walk, right when Spain lifted the heavy restrictions, allowing people to go outside during certain times. These flashbacks are not neat. They are fragmented, raw, and, at times, uncomfortable. Yet it continues to shape how I see people, power, and culture. It reminds me that in moments of crisis, dignity can be lost or restored in an instant, and that cultural awareness is not an extra—it is essential. Above all, this collective memory challenges me to this day: to stay attentive to cultural differences, to understand the subtle hierarchies and tensions that arise in all spaces, and to act with respect and humility in moments of uncertainty.