

## Talk by Jayni Gudka Re UnseenTours– Ahimsa Award 2024 at the House of Commons

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Pujya Saminijis, honourable minister, honourable members, esteemed guests and friends here present. Jai Jinendra and Pranaam.

I'd like to begin, if I may, with a question to you all.

What words come to mind when you think of homelessness?

Homelessness is on the rise in the UK with just under 2,000 people rough sleeping in London in the recent months, which is an increase of 33% since last year.

Global figures indicate that on any given night, the number of people experiencing homelessness worldwide exceeds 150 million.

But what words come to mind when YOU think of homelessness?

Poverty? Drug addiction? Alcohol Abuse? A threat? A nuisance to society? A \*cough\* Lifestyle choice?

You wouldn't be alone if you did, as many people think the same.

But homelessness is rarely a choice. It's often the result of a series of setbacks like job loss, health crises, relationship breakdowns, falling behind on rent, and even, as one of the people we work with will tell you, the result of being trafficked at just the age of 9 years old, into a life of modern slavery.

People experiencing homelessness don't just lack a place to call home. They also feel invisible and unseen.

So this evening, I invite you to look again, and see homelessness from a new perspective.

What I see is storytellers, curators, local experts and tour guides! Because who could know the hidden stories of the streets better, than people who, through a set of unfortunate events, had to possibly live on them?

And that's why we started - Unseen Tours 14 years ago, when a group of volunteers regularly went out on the streets of London, handing out hot drinks, food, socks and other essentials to

people rough sleeping on the streets of London. When doing this, we came to see that the people we met were excellent storytellers.

Not only did they know all the hidden stories of London, but their own personal stories were really powerful too.

Since we started, we have trained 27 people to curate their own tours of London. We've had more than 35,000 people joining our guides, learning more about homelessness in an enjoyable, yet informative way.

With 60% of ticket revenue also going directly to our tour guides, this makes it a sustainable way to help people lift themselves out of poverty and homelessness.... With dignity.

Unseen Tours is the world's first social enterprise that offers a sustainable approach to tackling homelessness through guided tours led by individuals who have experienced homelessness. By sharing their personal stories and deep knowledge of the city, these guides provide an authentic, eye-opening view of London that goes beyond typical tourist experiences. This empowers our guides and also helps change public perceptions around homelessness.

Our sustainable business model blends social impact with commercial activities. Unlike traditional charities that rely primarily on donations, Unseen Tours generates income through ticket sales, which funds fair wages for the guides while also reinvesting profits to grow the enterprise.

This creates a cycle of empowerment—guides earn a living wage, gain valuable skills, and are able to rebuild their lives, while visitors gain insights into social issues and the less known stories of the city.

By directly involving people affected by homelessness in the solution, each tour highlights the resilience of those who have faced hardship while educating participants on ways they can support systemic change.

Through providing an immediate income for those facing homelessness we also support the long-term goal of ending homelessness and advocate for social policies that address its root causes.

The tours are great for big corporates and local businesses – great for team building and helping them get to know local stories and history of the area where their businesses are situated.

The tours are also great for schools and universities as they bring topics like history, geography, literature, sociology and art - that students learn in the classroom to life.

I've almost reached my time here today, but I'd like to end with three asks, if I may.

And these asks are invitations to you, to have you join us on this journey to increase our social impact as an organisation.

And I'd like to offer you three ways that you can do this.

The first:

- If you're curious about why there's a statue popularly known as 'hanging out the washing' on Parliament Square,
- or why the world's first traffic light which was constructed outside these houses of Parliament in 1868 were taken away just one week after they were put up?
- If you'd like to know why Mahatma Gandhi and Charlie Chaplain chose to have their only meeting not in Westminster, but in Canning Town for some reason...

And if you'd like to hear stories about how people have turned their lives around after surviving things like human trafficking and homelessness, then bring a friend or two, and join us for unique experiences of London, through booking an Unseen Tour.

Our tours are friendly experiences that should be shared. They'll thank you, and you'll thank us.

The second:

Take us to where we can't get to alone.

We want the ability to keep doing this because it's impactful.. And we can prove that it really is changing lives. We need mechanisms to help us keep going and growing, and invite you to be our ambassadors. Help us reach more schools, universities and organisations, so we can invite them onto our experiences, and together we can help them see the world with a new perspective, helping end homelessness at the same time.

And the third:

Help us increase our impact.

There are so many stories that the world needs to hear, and we're on a mission to bring this real living peoples' history to the tourism, events and heritage industries - so that they're more inclusive in the perspectives they share and the people they engage with.

We're embarking on our first international project - in Brazil - and have big plans to expand to other places also. Please connect us with organisations who may be interested in collaborating with us,

And together, let's help more people lead a life of dignity... Now that's a lifestyle choice I think we should, and could all get behind.

All it takes is a little curiosity... just one walk at a time.

Thank you.

**By Jayni Gudka**  
**CEO: Unseentours**