

An Essay on Refugees

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AUTHOR BIO

Born in China and raised in Canada, the immigration process has never been easy for Yueer (Ariel) Zhang. She has always suffered from the idea of fitting in and thus she wishes to tackle the issue of forced migration. Interested in art and refugee issues, in grade 11 she decided to become an art teacher for refugee kids at Matthew House. From working with the students she understood the struggles of asylum seekers and decided to start a fundraiser for refugee students through the idea of an art book. Similarly, she decided to put her critics and thoughts about forced migration into words in an essay and publish it, hoping to reach a larger audience and encourage more people to talk about such issues.

ABSTRACT

This essay explores some of the issues that refugees face, citing examples across a range of national contexts. The author highlights important aspects of refugee crises and glosses some of the key concepts associated with these issues and events. The essay presents a case for greater attention to this important matter.

Keywords: *Refugees; asylum seekers; inequality; United Nations.*

INTRODUCTION

Violence, lack of food, sexual assault, diseases, death: these are the realities of the refugee crisis. Countless news stories and reports testify to these conditions. In August 2015, an abandoned refrigerator truck crammed with the bodies of 59 men, eight women and four children was discovered near the Hungarian border (Learn German, 2022). The refugee crisis is a worldwide problem and will remain so until governments and people collectively work together to solve them.

The definition of refugees according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are: people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.

There have always been refugees for people who have always been escaping conflict. Yet, as a society our response to these people has not improved. The reactions of the Canadian media today still carry the same whiff of xenophobia and racism that exemplified the treatment of European religious refugees in the 16th century. Our systems and thinking are stagnant. For example, Venezuelan refugees began fleeing their country in 1983 due to an economic crisis, the result of falling oil prices, international sanctions, and the country's business elite (UNHCR, N/D). Yet, in 2022 this is still one of the biggest refugee issues to remain. Such stagnation cannot be allowed to continue. In 2022, we stand at the edge of a cliff. Soon we will no longer be able to ignore these issues: the refugee crisis is only going to get worse as the climate emergency becomes more urgent. Millions of people are going to be displaced. This article will explore both what nations can do to best respond to the refugee crisis and what power individuals, even high school students, have to relieve the situation.

Leaving a homeland

There are three main reasons why an individual chooses to leave their community and country, and seek a life elsewhere. Statistics show that refugees mainly come from undeveloped nations, states which are facing both ongoing civil issues and the consequences of climate change (Red Cross, N/D). These countries, defined as less economically developed with little industry and little investment in education, health care, and other infrastructure, are expected to suffer the greatest impacts of climate change. Rising temperatures are causing famines and droughts. Unable to feed their families, people are fleeing their homes. According to the UNHCR, more than 20 million people have left their homes due to climate change issues each year (Red Cross, N/D). With no current solution to climate change and global temperature change set to rise to 2.4 degrees, this number will only continue to grow with even more people forced to flee.

The other contributor to immigration is gender and sexual inequality. Over 73 countries imprison and place death sentences on same sex relationship. Not only that, sexual assault rates, crime rates, death rates are all factors for someone to flee their country. Many who flee their countries for these reasons have a harder time finding a job in a new nation. Discrimination is seen in all states and although some do not give death sentences, transgender individuals' poverty rate is still high for countries that make up about 30% of the global population (Badgett, 2019).

Globally, many countries are also at war. 60 million people have been displaced because of the ongoing conflict in the middle east (Lynch, 2017). While the country's government is at war, it is the citizens themselves who face the consequences. In Yemen a failure of a political process created to bring stability to the country, following an uprising in 2011 that forced its long-time authoritarian president, Ali

Abdullah Saleh, to hand over power to his deputy, failed. Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi's inability to lead his own country caused an estimated 233,000 deaths, including 131,000 from indirect causes such as lack of food, health services and infrastructure. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed or wounded as a direct result of the fighting, including more than 10,000 children by the end of 2020 (Shaoul, 2021). Thus, these people have no choice but to flee their land. The choice to leave is often only the beginning of an immigrant's difficulties. Many who did not make it to immigration camps were often stripped, robbed, and sexually assaulted.

The reality that refugees face

Refugee camps are often overcrowded and unsanitary, lacking basic provisions. According to the non governmental organization Unite For Sight, 30% of refugee camps do not have adequate waste disposal services or latrines (Unite For Sight, N/D). Not only that, many refugees face the issue of communicating, finding a job, getting money for food, and are discriminated against due to xenophobia and racism. A study by Portes and his colleagues demonstrated that 26% of refugees who have stayed in their relocated countries for over 3 years still face discrimination due to the media's portrayal of refugees as criminals due to their "illegal" way of entering the country (International Organization for Migration, 2020). Often, refugees and migrants are blamed for society's social and economic woes, such as increased crime and unemployment. All of these trends have contributed to an alarming increase in racist violence and xenophobia against refugees.

Canada is not exempt from this phenomenon. Canada has reportedly one the highest quality of living standards across the world, yet the pandemic exposed how Canada has mistreated newcomers struggling to join our

nation (Jones, 2020). While many Canadian legal residents have been able to access government programmes to help them cope with the pandemic's socioeconomic effects, refugees are unable to participate in Canadian relief programs. Not only that, although we are accepting refugees, many face the issue of having no identification and are still in a state of being displaced – a condition in which a person has crossed national boundaries and cannot or is unwilling to return home due to a well-founded fear of persecution. It takes many years for refugees to be granted the protection of citizenship.

To improve as a nation

Although the suffering caused by displacement continues, organizations like the UN do the bare minimum, despite clear measures that could alleviate these issues. Two three steps in particular could drastically improve conditions: Nations making it easier for refugees to travel and prioritizing the lives of the refugees, providing better care and support systems at their borders and in-country. I will explain each in detail in the following paragraphs.

The most treacherous aspect of a refugee's journey is their attempts to flee, cross territories and enter borders. As such, the greatest impact can be made by easing this process: nation's must allow refugees to travel from nations with greater ease. As we all know, the route to resettlement for refugees is extremely dangerous and many die on the way to a new country. Developed nations with high GDP should be opening up safe and legal routes for refugees so they can reach and seek asylum without having to cross the sea in overcrowded boats or walk hundreds of miles carrying their children and belongings. There is a UN system called resettlement, designed to protect the most vulnerable refugees. This allows people to travel to another country, usually by plane, and settle

down for good. An estimated 1.38 million people will need to access this system globally over the next two years. (Amnesty , 2015) However, this system is only accessible to the most vulnerable refugees, such as torture survivors and people with urgent medical needs. Those who do not qualify are forced to make treacherous journeys themselves. This kind of scheme should be implemented by all developed nations. Many refugees lose their life trying to travel to a safe place and as a society; we should work towards a future where people can safely settle into their new homes.

Not only that, nations should be ensuring life as the first priority. One of Italy's leading human rights and immigration experts, Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo, professor of asylum law at the University of Palermo writes how recent reports suggest an increase in deaths of migrants attempting to reach Europe "In this context, deaths at sea since the beginning of the pandemic are directly or indirectly linked to the EU approach aimed at closing all doors to Europe and the increasing externalization of migration control to countries such as Libya." (Tondo, 2021) We say the lives of people are the most important but nations are putting fencing up, and pushing refugees from even entering their country. Many risk their lives to travel to nations only to be blocked back from entering because they don't have travel documents. So how do we solve that? For one, many refugees lack the documentation required to get a standard travel visa. Countries can allow refugees to travel securely and seek asylum when they arrive by providing them with a humanitarian visa. Furthermore, all nations should look into and prosecute human trafficking organizations that prey on refugees and migrants, putting people's safety first. We need to work towards a future that allows refugees to travel and settle in countries without threat.

Once settled, the next issue to tackle is combating Xenophobia and racial prejudice. Currently, governments blame refugees and migrants for economic and social difficulties. After violence and looting erupted in April and May 2015 in Durban, South Africa, at least four people died, many more were gravely injured, and over 1,000 Burundian and Congolese refugees were forced to escape (Amnesty International, N/D). Refugees who have already faced so much trauma traveling, proceed to live in a society that simply looks down on them. For one, all these developed nations fail to establish solid refugee systems, which include letting individuals request for asylum, evaluating their claims fairly, resettling the most vulnerable, and providing basic services like education and healthcare. We as a society fail to do the bare minimum for refugees, none of what I have stated above is hard to achieve for developed nations but we still fail to provide for them. This is where we as a society fail.

In the eyes of a teen

As the UN set goals to solve world issues, it is in the youth's responsibility and power to abide by them. On September 25th 2015, 17 sustainable development goals were adopted by 193 member states of the United Nations that aim to eliminate poverty and hunger, protect the environment from climate change, achieve gender equality and raise living standards by 2030 (UN, 2015). Who is the UN expecting to achieve these goals? The new generations. As teens are expected to do all these things, how can they do it? Let's take the idea of climate change for example. We all know we have to be sustainable with our resources however as we look at now, not many abide by that idea. However, as the older generation fails to abide by those sustainable goals, it is the younger generations responsibility to abide by them. Change does not happen over time but if these sustainable ideas into our daily lives it is

only a matter of time before it starts showing positive progress. We must care about these growing concerning issues and we must change our lifestyle for it to go in a positive direction. Like what Jemi Laclé, Chair of the World Bank says, “Development is a dialogue for and by the youth,” let’s develop into a better future for our society (Lacie, 2016).

Taking a deeper look at these issues, it is easy to feel hopeless. And yet, it is important to understand that the first step in forcing nations and institutions to create change, lies with us: highschoolers and young people. Many of us live in a privileged society with free education and I believe that is the route to solving this global issue as a teenager. As many of us focus on ourselves with global issues passing us by. This is partially a fault of the system we inhabit; education should be the most fundamental tool to create change. If a society wishes for change, teenagers are the key: we are the next generation. As teenagers start entering the workforce, knowledge of world issues is key. We cannot be expected to make justified, moral and actionable change if we have not been introduced to the realities which require our problem solving skills. An example would be schools talking and bringing up relevant world issues today such as the new abortion law, the Yemen crisis, and of course the refugee crisis. more often instead of just the core subjects. The schools should thrive to often achieve activities such as: Invite guest speakers, start deep conversations in the classroom about world issues. However the responsibility for educating our youth does not only rest in the classroom, it also lies with high schoolers themselves. way to stay updated on world issues through news, social media or even a family member. Take a class on world issues and understand the issues in society today. Stand up if you believe there is anything wrong with the world and try to make an impact by voicing your opinion. There are over 7 million youth across the country, aged 15

to 29 in Canada alone and through education, we can make sure the next world leaders are attuned to the plight of refugees and are able to respond to this crisis with compassion and realistic action (Statistic Canada, 2019).

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