

UNHCR NGO Consultations 2015
Closing Remarks by Najeeba Wazefadost,
Former Refugee and Settlement Caseworker from Australia

The Deputy High Commissioner, UNHCR

The organizers of this year's Consultation

Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen

I want to start by thanking you all for giving me this opportunity to make closing remarks in such an important forum on behalf of refugee youth who are often voiceless.

My Short Story

I was born in Afghanistan into the Hazara Shi'a Muslim minority.

My childhood was stolen: I don't have good memories with other children, instead I remember being afraid; I remember persecution and death. I had no access to education and was not considered human.

I was born in a country that is shattered after decades of war that has left little sign of justice, humanity and freedom. People like me who were born into a minority ethnic group (Hazara) are subjected to discrimination and slavery at the hands of the majority ethnic groups.

My family fled Afghanistan in 2000 without any plans other than to find somewhere safe. We made it to Indonesia and got on a boat for Australia, on a piece of wood; our safety and security limited to that piece of wood, risking starving or drowning at sea. When we arrived we spent time in detention before being released into the Australian community.

My experience has been long and traumatic. We were regularly dehumanized and we had no voice. All refugees struggle to have a voice, but the voices of children and youth are even more invisible. To be so invisible was a big challenge and I still feel it.

For me, hope was fundamental. I needed to believe that there was more to life than being trapped in uncertainty and fear. My father never gave up and always encouraged me to help others to reach their potential in exchange for the opportunities we have received.

Refugee youth are resilient, resourceful and determined. They are the foundation of the next generation and have the potential to create change and improve livelihoods. Young refugees need to be empowered to reach their potential. It is time that we recognize youth as agents of change rather than a burden.

To this end I am pleased to formally announce that the theme for next year's UNHCR NGO consultations will be on refugee youth leadership and participation. In addition I also announce the commencement of the Global Refugee Youth Consultations as a means to ensure that the voices of youth are no longer silent.

I have been privileged to have my "voice" returned to me since settling in Australia and now refugee youth all over the world, displaced or resettled, will be given a voice.

The Global Refugee Youth Consultations will be coordinated by the Youth and Adolescents in Emergencies (YAE) working group, in partnership with UNHCR. The consultations will aim to include participation of youth affected by displacement in the Asia Pacific, MENA, Africa and Americas regions as well as the inclusion of young people in next year's NGO consultations here in Geneva.

I encourage every NGO here to consider getting involved in this important initiative and to bring a young representative with you to next year's consultations.

For me, as a young refugee, my voice is my opportunity to make things better for others and myself who will take over the reigns of this world in the future. I have been privileged to be involved in a number of civil society organisations and won awards for my work in advocating for refugees and in particular young refugee women over the last 15 years since fleeing my country. I have been inspired by the lived experiences and determination of

others before me. I am a living testimony to the benefits of giving youth a voice and a symbol of hope to other young refugees.

I now work for Settlement Services International (SSI) in Sydney Australia where I now have the privilege to support refugee youth who have fled to a new life with their families. Some are without their family and may never reunite. I am here in Geneva to represent the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW) and most importantly, the voices of young refugees. Join me in making this a reality for others.

To conclude I will make some brief comments about this year's consultations. My experiences have led me to believe that durable solutions to refugee situations must include education, which leads to empowerment, access to protection including basic human rights of safety and security, and genuine participation of communities with lived experiences. I have heard this echoed throughout this year's consultations.

There is no one solution that will work for all but dignity of life, human rights and hope are foundational. Unfortunately the debate about solutions is often clouded by arguments of burden sharing, pull factors and border control rather than addressing the root causes of displacement and showing compassion to those who, by no choice of their own, have been uprooted from their homes.

Refugees and refugee youth do not want to be and are not a burden. They want to be part of the solution. However to achieve this they must be heard and empowered to act.

In Closing

To all young refugees:

You have the power to change this world and to make it better. Stand up and be part of the change!