

2015 UNHCR – NGO Consultations

Najeeba Wazefadost speech to Youth and Adolescents Session: Seeking Solutions for youth and Adolescents

Leaving your country for good is one of the hardest decisions a person can be forced to make. It means a break with all that you know — your family, your livelihood, your friends, how to fit in, how to be part of a society — all of the familiar sights and sounds and smells and tastes.

My name is Najeeba Wazefadost and I am a refugee from Afghanistan. I came to Australia with my family by boat in September 2000.

I was born in a country that is shattered after decades of war that has left little sign of justice, humanity or 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 childhood was stolen: I don't have good memories with other children, instead I remember being afraid; I remember persecution and death. We got on a boat, on a piece of wood, not knowing where it was taking us; our safety and security limited to that piece of wood, risking starving or drowning at sea.

We were coming from a war-torn country where we were really traumatised. I was a child, and being locked up inside an overcrowded detention centre creates the sense of being treated like an object, like a number, not like a human being. We had no voice. All refugees struggle to have a voice, but the voices of children and youth are even more silent. To be so invisible was a big challenge and I still feel it.

My experiences have led me to believe that solutions to refugee situations must include a focus on education, permanent residency and involving communities with lived experiences.

When we arrived in Australia we were hopeful to start a better life, to establish safety and security and we desperately wanted to belong — to stop being an asylum seeker or a refugee and once again have the value and rights of a citizen. Education played a key role in helping me to belong and to understand my rights. It enabled me to reach success and develop leadership skills and the capacity to contribute back to the community.

Education was not something that was available to me in Afghanistan and was something I really valued. It helped me to learn English and to make friends. It helped me to learn about Australia and to feel safe. I therefore recommend that Governments and NGOs ensure that tailored secondary and tertiary education is available to all refugees but especially for youth under 25.

When my family arrived to Australia we were put into detention which felt like prison with no access to the outside world. There was no privacy with 24hr video surveillance and it was over crowded. I remember being known by a number rather than my name and did not feel human. My family was eventually granted a temporary protection visa. Four years later the laws were changed and we were granted permanent protection. It was at this point that we really started to feel that we belonged in Australia and in 2004 we became Australian citizens.

Being in detention and having temporary status for so many years made it very difficult for my family to feel safe and secure or to settle. Arbitrary detention and temporary solutions that draw out the uncertainty for refugees is not an effective solution. Effective solutions must offer long term outcomes that encourage belonging. Therefore I recommend that Governments utilise community based processing rather than detention and seek to provide outcomes to claims as fast and cost effectively as possible.

When my family was released from detention we received settlement support that was funded by the Australian government and delivered by an NGO. I was fortunate to receive support from people who understood my needs and helped me to make the transition. I was also helped by members of the Afghan community who had lived experiences of resettlement in Australia. I found this assistance to be invaluable.

In 2011 I was employed by Settlement Services International in Sydney as a resettlement case manager. This has given me the opportunity to use my experiences to help newly arrived refugees make a new life in Australia. In this role I am also able to assist refugee youth to be empowered by mentoring them through the resettlement experience and to ultimately belong. I therefore recommend that resettlement services be adequately funded and must include engagement with former refugees where possible.

Refugees must not be seen as a burden and should instead be seen as an asset. Providing refugees with genuine opportunities to access education, employment, mentoring and social supports are essential. This includes ensuring that the voices of children and youth are included in debates about effective solutions to refugee movements.

Today I am no longer defined by my past and I have been able to achieve dreams that I never thought possible. This has been a result of the education I have received and the partnership between my community and service providers.