Becoming, Belonging & Believing

The Newsletter of the Refugee and Asylum Seekers Education Network



Welcome

Dear Friend -

Thank you for picking up *Becoming, Belonging & Believing: The Newsletter of the Refugee and Asylum Seekers Education Network.*

The Refugee and Asylum Seekers Education Network is our response to concerns we share with many others around the world on what is the largest displacement of people in known history. According to the United Nations, in 2015 there were over 65 million forcibly displaced people around the world - including over 20 million refugees, 3 million asylum seekers, and over 40 million internally displaced people. The realities of these numbers fall particularly hard on young people whose educational futures are marked by uncertainty due to the forced mobility they encounter.

Over the past several months we have been learning about the work of numerous people working to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom are children and young adults, are provided access to educational opportunities. This publication is our attempt to share much of what we have been learning. In this first issue, you'll read about the important role advocates play in all sectors, including academia, non-profit, private, and tech sectors. You will meet Colleen Thouez, Senior Training and Research Advisor at UNITAR, who is launching a university-led alliance for refugees and migrants at risk. And, you'll learn about Rama Chakaki, VIP.Fund co-founder, and her education crowd-funding app, edSeed. We'll share with you the advocacy work of Spark 15, a refugee youth-led NGO in Malta, as well as that of Priscilla Monico Marin who is an advocate for refugee and migrant children and youth in the New York metro area. We hope the work of all these people excites you as much as it excites us.

If you have any thoughts or ideas for future issues of Becoming, Belonging, and Believing, please don't hesitate to contact us at info@refugeeeducationnetwork.org.

Towards the furtherance of educational opportunities for all,

Kyle Farmbry, J.D., Ph.D.

Dean, Graduate School Rutgers University-Newark Editor/Publisher, *Becoming, Belonging, & Believing*

Key Role For Universities U.N. Expert Says



Colleen Thouez at the Global Mayors Summit opening forum on September 18, 2017 Photo Credit- Joe Peoples, International Peace Institute.

Colleen Thouez remains buoyant even as the worldwide refugee crisis has accelerated. There are "a thousand policy challenges," she concedes, but the issue "garners as much hope as it does fear and concern."

A senior advisor specializing in migration at the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, Thouez is co-founder of the Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility. The group brings together leaders from cities around the world in an attempt to develop common and humane standards in welcoming and resettling migrants and refugees. The vast majority of refugees wind up in cities, according to the U.N., and Thouez thinks the mayors' group can have a significant impact.

"You have mounting pressure from civil society to do something about the refugee crisis," she said. "It's really hard to ignore. More people are getting involved and we have mobilization from the ground up."

Thouez is a native of Montreal, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees from McGill University. She received a doctorate from Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and was awarded the Terry Sanford Civil Society Fellowship at Duke University.

She has traveled the globe for her work at the U.N. and oversees a global learning platform to teach local and regional officials about migration and refugee law. She also chairs a migration-related project, KNOMAD, for the World Bank and co-directed research on the Sutherland Report named after the former Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Peter D. Sutherland, commissioned by Columbia University to study global trends in migration and mobility.

Thouez is an adjunct professor at American University's School of International Service and author of over 60 published journal articles and research papers. She lives in the New York metropolitan area with her husband and three children.

With nations often at a loss in dealing with the largest population displacement in history, colleges and universities can play a pivotal role in responding to the refugee crisis and shaping migration policy, said Colleen Thouez, a senior advisor with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research.

"The first step in creating a social movement is understanding what is being done and what can be done. There really is no time to waste," said Thouez, during a recent visit to Rutgers University-Newark.

Thouez was instrumental in organizing the Global Mayor's Summit on Migration and Refugee Policy and Practice, held in New York on September 18th. The groundbreaking effort, with support from the Open Society Foundations, Columbia University, and Concordia, drew leaders from all major U.S. cities as well as about 40 mayors from abroad.

One of the initiatives to come from discussions related to the Mayor's Summit was around the development of a parallel effort focused on building a university partnership on matters of migration Thouez said the alliance will map out the work of hundreds of universities in the United States in four key areas:

1. Opening legal pathways for refugees and at-risk migrants with opportunities for study and vocational training – a critical task as only a small fraction of refugees and at-risk migrants are resettled (even temporarily).



Global Mayors Summit opening forum September 18, 2017

- 2. Welcoming and providing assistance to refugees and at-risk migrants on university campuses and in surrounding communities.
- 3. Participating in "multi-track advocacy" from student associations to university presidents across the United States.
- 4. Generating data and research that can directly address current policy quandaries in a field that is growing in complexity.

The alliance will work closely with city leaders to formulate ground-up solutions. Student associations are key in that effort, as they are most active in welcoming migrant students and faculty and in raising awareness in the community, stresses Thouez. "Without students' voices, action would move more slowly, and the prospect of making a real dent in universities' role as humanitarian actors would be less great," she said.

Indeed, students and higher education leaders throughout

the United States have become more vocal on migration issues: speaking out in the wake of the US Administration's ban on travelers from predominately Muslim countries and on plans to rollback protections for some undocumented migrants. Thouez added she was struck by the number of ongoing initiatives at colleges and universities across the United States to assist refugees and migrant students and in finding ways to underwrite their education and living expenses.

"One of the great things about universities, and cities too, is we don't have to tackle that tough question of what we have to do with our borders. We just have to tackle the question of what to do in our community," Thouez said. "As cities become more brave, taking action and measures to physically protect people, universities should do the same."

Cities can take the lead on migration policy, as they have done recently regarding climate change, she said.

Thouez cited the recent example of the mayors of Barcelona and Athens coordinating response to migrants coming ashore on the Mediterranean coast, even as European Union leaders stumbled.

"The world is changing. We can't let people continue to die in the ocean or in the desert, to let children be scarred for life," she said, stressing the need for acknowledging the crisis. "That requires some courage."

Thouez said she's heartened that the new university alliance can build on existing programs that protect scholars at risk in their homelands and promote academic freedom.

She added that there are important efforts underway to provide face-to-face, online and blended learning in refugee camps and cities with high concentrations of at-risk migrants and refugees. "University communities can be agents to influence national governments' attitudes and policies in this area," she said.



There are few young people like Hourie Tafech in the world. Born a third-generation refugee, she's now a Ph.D. student and a globally recognized advocate for the rights of displaced youth.

"Education has played a very important role in my life," says Tafech, 26. "Because I had the chance to be educated, I am here now." Here is New Jersey where Tafech is currently studying in the Division of Global Affairs at Rutgers University-Newark.

It's a surprising trajectory given the low odds that Tafech would even get a high school education. She was born and raised inside a refugee camp in Lebanon where her family has lived since 1948. Her grandparents ended up there after they fled the Israeli occupation in Palestine.

"No one chooses to leave parents, family, everything to flee to another country unless they're obliged to do so," she says.

Unlike many refugees, Tafech was lucky to get an education at a United Nations high school in her camp. When she finished, she landed a scholarship and earned a B.A. in graphic design. But after graduation, she couldn't find a job in Lebanon, even after searching for three years.

"In Lebanon, it's so difficult to survive as a refugee," she said. "I tried."

Tafech made the decision to leave her family and apply for a visa to Malta—one of the few countries that accepts Palestinian refugees and offers them free education.

Despite her good fortune in getting the visa, she faced significant obstacles in Malta as she tried to continue her studies: severe financial constraints, having to learn both Maltese and English, xenophobia, and a government that did not have policies in place for refugees in the post-secondary system.

These problems inspired Tafech to cofound SPARK 15, which the UN calls the world's first youth refugeeled NGO. Its mission is to advocate for the rights of displaced young people. Because of Tafech's tireless contributions, she's been invited to speak before the United Nations and the European Parliament on the topic of how to better integrate young refugees. This work led her to Rutgers University – Newark, where she began her studies in September 2017.

Despite her absence back in Malta, SPARK 15's members continue to make progress. They're currently working closely with the Maltese government to develop an integration policy that considers the unique needs of displaced youth. A cornerstone of the policy is to facilitate access to university for qualified refugee students.



Mohamed Hassan, a co-founder of SPARK 15, says their success is due to the fact that the young people who are facing the problems understand the nuances better than anyone else.

"If you listen to young people, their solutions make more sense than the policymakers' solutions," he says.

Hassan, 24, knows all too well the many issues facing young displaced people.

"I spent my last two years as a teenager living in a container," he says. Hassan arrived in Malta in 2011 with his parents, three little sisters, and one younger brother. Like many refugees, they were forced to live in a government designated shipping container.

His family had already been through much upheaval. Hassan's grandfather emigrated from Eritrea during the War for Independence, and settled in Sudan. That's where Hassan's father was born as a refugee. Eventually his father found work in Saudi Arabia and Hassan was born there. But complications arose, and the family was forced to flee, moving through both Norway and Sweden, before ending up in Malta.

"There is no promise for tomorrow, he says. "It's quite hard to have a life. It's frustrating and motivating."

Motivating might not be a word that would come to mind for most people faced with this situation, but much like Tafech, Hassan is not most people.

He's channeled all of it — his family's hardships, the uncertainty about when and where, if ever, he'll become a citizen of any country, the not knowing if he'll be able to find a good job and build a life — into working for other forcibly displaced young people.

Hassan is now developing an online platform specifically designed for displaced youth. This platform will feature a blog on the Spark 15 website to further the conversation and connect youth from all countries. "There is no platform right now where youth can come together and start raising awareness of the struggle and raising solutions together," he says.

Since arriving in Malta, Hassan has become part of the just one percent of refugees in the world who attend college or university.

Last year, he completed a business diploma. Now with the help of SPARK 15's policy work he's in university studying foundation humanities and commerce.

He's also waiting to hear if his application for refugee status in the US will be accepted. He says his dream is to live in America and to be self-employed in media. But he's firm in his knowledge that greater global forces often overshadow a person's skills, hard work, and their desire to contribute.

"There is a good number, a good percentage of young people who are being thrown away," he says.

Tafech, meanwhile, has become part of a tiny fraction of refugees who study at the doctoral level. While she researches ways to make sure a generation of young people around the world is not lost, her message to all nations remains the same.

"These displaced people are not displaced anymore," says Tafech.
"They are part of their new society. If we offer them education we offer them a stable life, and this stability will be reflected in the whole society."



Photo Credit: Advocates for Children. Carlos, a 16-year-old immigrant student from Guatemala, with AFC staff attorney Priscilla Monico Marin in September 2015.

Originally a bilingual elementary school teacher for Teach for America, Priscilla Monico Marin became interested in how areas of law impact disadvantaged families and decided to pursue law school. Believing firmly in every child's right to access education regardless of citizenship or language ability, Marin joined Advocates for Children of New York (AFC)'s Immigrant Students Rights Project three years ago to advocate exclusively for immigrant families and unaccompanied minors living in New York City.

For Marin, encouraging multilingualism and multiculturalism is "a huge part of who we can be as a country and as a society." Because she feels so strongly in the value of linguistic and cultural diversity, she has made this her life's work.

Some of Marin's clients are children who may have immigrant parents, but were themselves born in the US. A number of her clients are minors in their late teens, who, after fleeing violence or poverty in their home countries, arrive in the US on their own. "Though challenging, unaccompanied minor cases are highly rewarding. Despite having so much on their plates, we witness a great deal of resilience among them," Marin says.

Illustrating that strength is in numbers, Marin recalls one client from Guatemala who began acting as an informal "referral service" of sorts for his friends who had also arrived unaccompanied. She adds, "Usually, these clients are being referred by another agency or service because they do not have guardians and are dealing with homelessness, which can itself be detrimental to accessing education." For one thing, unaccompanied minors may need to support themselves and pay back outstanding smuggler debt, which compels them to work without permits. This leaves them vulnerable

to exploitation by employers and with less time to attend or focus on school

She emphasizes, "These kids have the potential to do really great things. The issue is not can they - the issue is how."

Based on trends they've seen on the ground, AFC is currently advocating for improved bilingual education programs and bilingual special education services. English language programs are still not at the level they should be. A shortage in bilingual teachers, for example, has led AFC to advocate for more dual language programs. AFC is currently having conversations with the City of New York to recruit more bilingual teachers.

According to Marin, AFC also is pushing NYC schools to improve bilingual special education services, so that immigrant English Language Learners (ELL) students with special needs gain meaningful and equal educational access to that of their non-migrant peers.

Following last year's election, AFC has also been a source of hope for immigrant students and their families. While the NYC Department of Education (DOE) has issued statements to families offering reassurance, undocumented families continue to feel apprehensive. "There was panic...a lot of our clients were really concerned about their status and....were filled with uncertainty."

In response, much of AFC's policy work has revolved around creating and maintaining safe and welcoming schools for immigrant families. AFC has, for instance, advocated for the DOE to roll out a policy regarding Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) entering school grounds.

While shaping policy, AFC continues to go out into the community to

reassure families that their children's educational rights are not impacted by their immigration status - and that they have the legal right to protect them.

Marin adds, "When I start to see a family [act]...reserved or fearful and I don't know what their status is, I usually say to them, 'I just want you to know that this is your right whether or not you have status." And then she explains what this opportunity could mean for their child.

In this work, Marin says she is not only an attorney, but also a social worker, an advocate, and a friend. She reflects, "I think that's part of the work. It's a combination... that makes a huge difference for our families."



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Priscilla Monico Marin

Beating the Odds: Refugee Sisters' Road to University





"More than anything we were very fortunate because my parents were very thorough," said Emelina. "But for others there is a lack of information on how to access services such as education."

Access to education, healthcare, and employment remains limited for refugees in most countries. In South Africa, primary and secondary schools are public, but entrance to university is highly competitive. Both sisters were given a boost when their parents researched ways for them to earn scholarships to attend private high schools.

Money is a huge obstacle to higher education for most refugees. In South Africa, low-interest government loans are available only to citizens and the process to citizenship is lengthy, at times taking more than 20 years.

The sisters are now permanent residents. Gratia, who is studying refugee identity, won private scholarships and fellowships to attend university. She also won a prestigious Mellon Mays Fellowship to study at the selective Bowdoin College in Maine this past summer.

Their mother, an accountant in Rwanda who now works for a non-profit group, took out private loans to pay for Emelina's veterinary school, but the money is now running out, two-thirds of the way through the six-year program.

"I need to organize something with the faculty to make a plan to finish my degree," Emelina said. "Everything is a negotiation."

Indeed, with little certainty in their lives, much seems to hinge on negotiation for most refugees. Beyond the economic and logistical barriers to education - and

ultimately employment - there also is one of perception, said Emelina. They've watched their father, who was a lawyer in Rwanda, struggle with unemployment in South Africa, where they have not always felt entirely welcome.

The sisters say their education gives them something concrete and help them feel somewhat more anchored. But still it's difficult, even after living most of their lives in South Africa. A return to Rwanda is unsafe and out of the question.

"This is supposed to be familiar, but at the same time I belong to another culture," said Gratia. "I have a deep sense of wanting to experience the land and my family, but at the same time a deep sense of anxiety," she said. "South Africa does now occupy that status of home – with a small h."

App To Fund Refugee Youth's Tuition

Less than 1 percent of the refugee population worldwide has access to a university education, and for Syrians alone that means 142,000 young people destined to live out their lives in refugee camps or squalor.

"Effectively they're condemned to very low-wage jobs not to mention that in the host countries there are not enough jobs to start with," said Rama Chakaki, an activist who focuses on higher education for refugees. "You're literally losing a generation and we're creating what's essentially slave labor."

Chakaki, who is Syrian born but now lives in the United States, says her visits to Syrian refugee camps convinced her that advancing education for employment was dire.

"I think it's definitely eye opening," she said. "You feel overwhelmed initially by the magnitude of the problem. You want to help every child and you know you can't. You feel very guilty for being able to walk away from the situation and being able to sleep in your own hed."

Chakaki has found a way to help

many young adults get money for higher education.

It's called edSeed, and staffers and volunteers are fanning out to find Syrians, Palestinians and other Arab nationals who will benefit. The team looks for students who have been accepted to college but cannot afford it and publicizes their plight.

The app is not restricted by ethnicity but non-profits that work with the target groups are the ones getting the word out.

Once students are identified and their college acceptances verified, they're taught how to tell their stories online to donors in a format that looks much like Instagram. Contributors on the app pick which students they want to support, and the money goes directly to the institutions. Donations can be as little as \$10. In some cases, the fundraising appeal is directed at students and staff at the college that the student wants to attend.

Many students need only \$2,000 to \$5,000 because they have other scholarship money or go to a low-cost career certificate program.

Chakaki favors shorter programs that get students into the workforce quicker such as nanodegrees offered on Udacity.

"Most of them are under a lot of pressure to get income or support an extended family. So the quicker the program is, the better it is for them," she said. "Otherwise, they and their families are left behind. Without a college education, they also become vulnerable to fundamentalism and, in the case of women, prostitution."

Mohamad Khalil, a Palestinian student who was born in the Ein Elhilweh Refugee Camp in Lebanon, crowdfunded on edSeed. Khalil was accepted into four prestigious universities in the United Kingdom, and a private company that saw his appeal is paying for his education, Chakaki said.

"We hope that we can fund 6,000 young men and women like Mohamad in 3 years and with that, help 50,000 of their family members out of the situation they're in. That could essentially shut down a refugee camp," said Chakaki.

Lebanon - Sadaam. Credit: Brian David, VIP.fund Co-founder /Syrian Refugee Tent Camp on a farm in the Bekaa Valley. Young man's name - Sadaam and his younger brother in the red boots is Odai Sadaam is 13 years old, out of school for two years. Spends his time playing football in the camp, or goes to help his elder brothers on their daily farming or fruit packing jobs.





Remarks by Rama Chakaki during Closing Plenary of Solve at MIT on May 10, 2017. (Photo Credit: Adam Schultz)

Rama Chakaki was inspired to help refugees after listening to the stories her brother told about his year-long stint working in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria.

Chakaki, who was born in Syria, was saddened by her brother's observations about the inadequacy of education within Palestinian refugee camps there. Wanting to see the situation for herself, she began visiting refugee camps in Lebanon.

"I saw the refugee camps that have been there for 50 years. I saw the state of these camps and I've seen generations of youth getting marginalized," Chakaki said.

Chakaki knew what it was like to be a foreigner inhabiting someone else's land. Before Chakaki started kindergarten, her family moved to Saudi Arabia for job opportunities, a country where citizenship was reserved for the native born or granted by royal decree.

Longing for citizenship rights and a sense of belonging, her family

moved again to the U.S. just before Chakaki started college. There she had to contend with an all-English curriculum at George Washington University (GWU), a tough transition from her all-Arabic high school in Saudi Arabia. It made her give up on her plans to pursue a medical degree, settling on an engineering degree instead.

"My work with causes started well before the Syrian conflict began," she explained. "Since 2003, my children and I volunteered at a center for abandoned children in Syria. During the early days of the conflict, we searched for positive, inspiring stories and shared them to give hope and present an alternative narrative in the media. Soon thereafter, I began working on the ground with youth in camps and urban settlements."

Chakaki wasn't always a social impact entrepreneur. She worked for many years as an engineer after receiving her degree from GWU. She worked on a team that built content distribution networks, which are "what allows"

internet users at home to receive video/web content quickly." In this role, she worked with numerous Fortune 500 companies that were building an online presence in eCommerce.

Prompted by the fallout from the 2001 terrorist attacks, she decided to move Dubai, where she ran a team that built technology that supported credit card management systems and ATMs and developed technology that helped prevent money laundering.

When the Syrian conflict broke out, she was intending to join the Syrian Trust for Development and support their programs and global fundraising. But she decided against that as the situation in Syria worsened, and felt she'd be able to do more for Syrian youth as an American citizen living in the United States. "I'm an activist for education, which is a human right," she said. "The work I do for Syrians applies to refugees worldwide, and the US is the right launch pad for my message."

Our Network Commitment

In September of 2016, the United Nations adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, a wide-reaching statement to guide work related to the evolving realities for refugees and migrants around the world. A central theme in the New York Declaration relates to ensuring educational opportunities for refugees and migrants.

As advocates and educators, we recognize that we are responsible for the education needs of refugee and migrant populations. Our Network therefore aims to promote critical elements of the New York Declaration, which pertain to the creation of opportunities in "...quality primary and secondary education in safe learning environments," as well as in "...tertiary education, skills training and vocational education" for refugees and migrants at risk.

As set forth by the Declaration, we recognize and commit to promoting:

- "The potential of young people and will work to create the conditions for growth, employment and education that will allow them to be the drivers of development."
- "Measures to improve their integration and inclusion, as appropriate, and with particular reference to access to education, health care, justice and language training. We recognize that these measures will reduce the risks of marginalization and radicalization."
- "The expansion of private sponsorship for individual refugees and opportunities for labour mobility for refugees, including through private sector partnerships, and for education, such as scholarships and student visas."
- "Recognition of foreign qualifications, education and skills and cooperation in access to and portability of earned benefits."

We hope that you will join us in making an impact.

For information on how to join the Refugee and Asylum Seekers Education Network please visit us at www.refugeeeducationnetwork.org or email us at info@refugeeeducationnetwork.org.

For more information on the New York Declaration, please visit: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1

