

## A lifelong commitment to justice

HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan

**Barbara Harrell-Bond's work had a radical impact on the lives of the uprooted and on people's attitudes towards them.**

The study of displacement has a long history, yet it was not until the publication of Barbara Harrell-Bond's seminal work *Imposing Aid – Emergency Assistance to Refugees* in 1986 that the entire system of international humanitarian assistance was submitted to an historical, comparative and critical appraisal. She subjected the 'humanitarian industry', as she called it, to unrelenting scrutiny, demanding change from those who had previously been untouchable.

Her formidable intellect, alongside her rigorous academic and field research, made her a pioneer in her field. Once described as a "human bulldozer"<sup>1</sup> she was not afraid to criticise aspects of refugee assistance that not only did not work but were all too often counter-productive. She saw the relationships between various actors and agencies – humanitarian agencies, international supporters, local governments and host communities – as often controlling and disempowering. She abhorred the opacity of complex relief systems and bureaucratic pettifoggery which descended into welfarism, stripping recipients of all agency and with it their human dignity and their hope for the future. Not surprisingly, this endeared her to no-one, apart from the uprooted themselves.

She had seen with her own eyes the traumatising impact of the horrifying experiences that large numbers of refugees in southern Sudan had suffered but this only intensified her determination not to be a 'voice for the voiceless' but instead to give the voiceless a voice of their own.

The past year has seen as many negative developments as positive in both my country – Jordan – and the wider world. Barbara would be enraged to know that the war in Yemen – which in early 2019 entered its fifth year – has led to the worst humanitarian crisis on record. She would have been outraged to hear of the withdrawal of US funding for the

UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 2018 and the moves to potentially dismantle the organisation altogether, but would have been heartened to see the response from elsewhere, particularly from parts of the Arab world in supporting the vital services it provides.

Despite the overwhelming pressures, Barbara refused to see refugees solely as victims, their identity subsumed into a category or classification, removed from all individuality and agency. Instead she recognised that an individual's professional skills and other knowledge can be of huge benefit to a host country and she sought the inclusion of the uprooted in host countries' socio-economic development plans.

Nor did she shy away from the harsh realities of the refugee experience for both refugee and relief worker. She understood that being crowded into close proximity with a bunch of strangers or, worse, people one may fear does not necessarily inspire friendship and community; nor do the deprivation and disorientation involved in becoming uprooted and resettled or the stripping of dignity and hope encourage generosity. Meanwhile, the relief worker may become disillusioned and hurt by the absence of gratitude and all too frequent hostility they encounter.

Not everything is doom and gloom, however. Barbara would have given her full support to those who are trying to do good things in bad times. I refer, for example, to the work done by Lloyd Axworthy<sup>2</sup> to counter the globalism of indifference facing refugees, to counter the 'narrative of fear' and to produce practical proposals to hold governments accountable and to raise revenue for development for the benefit of refugees.

### Speaking truth to power

Feisty and sharp-tongued, Barbara was never afraid to speak truth to power. She challenged

all assumptions but was no armchair critic. Just as she ‘walked the walk’ in making her home a haven of welcome to numerous uprooted people, demonstrating a huge warmth and generosity, so she teased out the alternatives to current approaches. Fuelled by coffee and cigarettes, she and I would talk long into the night about the crucial importance of ensuring appropriate deployment of international aid if it is to benefit both refugees and their local hosts. She believed in placing more confidence in local structures, both governmental and non-governmental, rather than in international personnel, and in creating job opportunities for both refugee and host workers, thereby strengthening host economies to the benefit of all.

Barbara believed in the over-riding importance of self-determination irrespective of status. International refugee law is perhaps the oldest form of law that attempts to recognise the inherent need not only to protect people but to grant them a degree of self-determination. Barbara was an unflinching advocate of legal aid programmes and refugee rights throughout her life. She founded the Refugee Studies Programme (now Centre) in Oxford in 1982 and went on to establish several other programmes in the Global South. Later she established and ran the Rights in Exile programme which provides refugee legal aid information and promotes legal assistance for refugees wherever they may be.

Access to justice, for which Barbara fought all her life, is not only a human right but is fundamental to the promotion of all other rights: political, economic, social, cultural and civil. It was in the belief that “the opposite of poverty is not wealth... in too many places, the opposite of poverty is justice”<sup>3</sup> that in 2005 I joined forces with Madeleine Albright, Gordon Brown, Hernando de Soto and others to found the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, focusing on the link between exclusion, poverty and the law. Without justice, poverty, inequality and marginalisation cannot be reduced, let alone eradicated.

The Islamic world has a strong heritage of indigenous political thought which draws on intrinsically Islamic thought, values and ethics, and offers ethical alternatives. Barbara was well aware that 80% of today’s refugees are Muslim and are hosted in predominantly Muslim countries. It was only common sense, therefore, to look for culturally appropriate solutions to the challenges faced by both. Together we would rail against the short-sightedness of curtailing – particularly after 9/11 – the ability of indigenous resources, such as *Zakat* funds, to be used to assist the uprooted and their host countries. The fear then was that such funds might be channelled into terrorist hands but we asked ourselves whether leaving a vacuum would be worse.

Crucially, as Barbara appreciated, Islam both encourages charitable giving and actively discourages the creation of dependency which is seen as undermining human dignity. Similarly, the importance of justice in terms not only of equitable distribution of wealth but also of the protection of the weak against exploitation by the strong, and advocacy on behalf of those facing injustice, is a fundamental element of Islamic belief.

Rather than leaving us diminished, the loss of Barbara must instead make us even more determined to continue her work. Passionate and compassionate, her commitment to all aspects of the life of the uprooted knew no bounds. Her honesty in all things struck at the heart of corrosive, paternalistic and self-justifying institutions and practices, and it is up to each and every one of us to continue her legacy.

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1. [www.thenation.com/article/remembering-barbara-harrell-bond-a-fierce-advocate-for-refugees/](http://www.thenation.com/article/remembering-barbara-harrell-bond-a-fierce-advocate-for-refugees/)
2. Chair, World Refugee Council; formerly Canada’s minister of Foreign Affairs and minister of Employment and Immigration.
3. Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, TED Talks 2012 and 2013.



#### FMR podcasts

<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series>  
(search for ‘forced migration review’).

