Being young and out of place

Unable to see the future: refugee youth in Malawi speak out

Lauren Healy

In a protracted refugee setting like Dzaleka, where multiple generations are born and raised, young refugees are struggling to hold on to hopes and dreams for a future that does not include the label of ‘refugee’.

In Malawi, 45km north of the capital city of Lilongwe, lies the Dzaleka refugee camp, home to approximately 15,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and Ethiopia. As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Malawi is obliged to adhere to the Convention but, as was its right, made nine reservations. The reservations pertain to the provisions of wage-earning employment, public education, labour legislation, social security and freedom of movement for refugees within Malawi. These reservations pose complex challenges, especially for adolescents entering into adulthood who wish to seek higher education, gain employment, marry and begin families.

In Dzaleka, school-aged children are offered pre-school through secondary school education at no cost. However, if and when students graduate from secondary school, there is little opportunity for tertiary-level or higher adult education due to limited capacity and inadequate resources. To help close this gap, Jesuit Commons Higher Education at the Margins began providing Internet-based distance learning in 2010, while the World University Service of Canada enables a selected number of qualified secondary-school graduates to resettle in Canada and attend university. But placements in these higher education programmes are extremely competitive and only a very small number of individuals meet the required standards.

Team-building activity for adolescents, Dzaleka refugee camp, Malawi

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1. www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm
The majority of youth in Dzaleka have spent all their lives in Malawi, taught the same school curriculum as the local population, surrounded by a local culture and among a local people yet not free to integrate as local citizens: “We are just like Malawians but we are not Malawians.” (Martha, an 18-year-old from DRC) 2

Without the inherent rights and freedoms of citizens, the younger generation of refugees is more and more despondent. When asked what he would do upon graduating from secondary school, Sal, a 20-year-old Burundian, said, “I want to become a doctor” – a feasible goal for Sal who receives perfect marks and is ranked number one amongst his fellow learners. But when asked “What do you want to do after graduating from secondary school if you are still living here in the refugee camp?” without hesitation Sal replied, “Here in Dzaleka it cannot happen. When you live in camp you change your behaviours, your expectations. It can’t happen because I am a refugee.”

Peter from DRC explained the effect that camp life has on him. Although agreeing that there were positive aspects to camp life because they were not living in fear of civil war or being recruited as soldiers, he said: “Life in camp is difficult because we cannot see our future. … You can look around and you are an old man walking with a stick, not having reached your goals.”

What about finding a life partner and beginning a family together? Rashid, an 18-year-old Congolese man, replied, “In my country you become a man when you marry and have children of your own. Your family gives you a plot of land and you go about your business. Here, no, I am afraid to marry. Where will we go – what will we do?

I cannot marry.” Others agreed that marriage was not an option for them – although an increasingly common trend amongst camp youth is early pregnancy, young parenthood and rising levels of school drop-outs.

A sentiment shared by the young adults in Dzaleka is that the current situation and the challenges they face entering into adulthood are largely out of their control: “Put everything in the hands of God, then maybe the future will be better.” “It’s a situation. You have to accept it.” Whether or not adolescents use fate, religion or family support as tools for coping, there is generally a lack of a sense of agency to relationships, to employment and to educational prospects.

Services for displaced youth in refugee camp settings should work toward addressing the issue of hopelessness by giving youth the opportunity to express their wants and needs in an open forum. Services might do well to provide adolescent youth and young adults with a safe space to organise social, political and entrepreneurial groups, empowering and strengthening their self-worth, while at the same time improving quality of life during displacement. Creating more opportunities for higher education programmes will provide a realistic means for youth to fulfill their short- and long-term goals of becoming contributing adults.

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2. All names have been changed.

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Not inheriting the past

Yara Romariz Maasri

In certain situations second-generation forced migrants may be expected and even encouraged to inherit ‘the rage of their ancestors’. My research into notions of identity and belonging in second-generation Lebanese who were brought up abroad after their parents were forced to flee the 1975-90 war in Lebanon suggests that the parents of my respondents either had no rage to transmit or deliberately chose not to transmit it.

Instead, they chose to teach their children generic notions of ‘Lebaneseness’ that did not reflect the sectarian divisions that were the cause of so much strife in Lebanon, preferring to promote peaceful coexistence and national, rather than sectarian, identity. The children internalised these notions, making them their own while at the same time connecting to the culture of the countries where they were brought up:

“I love being Lebanese. I love my country for its beauty, its traditions, freedom in life and expression. However, I love Qatar because I find security with a job and many friends around.”

“I had no idea that there were many different sects [in Lebanon]. I did not know, for example, that there was a significant Shi’a or Christian community there or that the Druze sect even existed. My parents simply taught us that we were Lebanese.”

“Being out of Lebanon and growing up in the diaspora has made me half-Swedish, half-Lebanese, and I try to take the good things from each culture.”

The only thing that detracts from these plural identities is a feeling some of the respondents have of not belonging anywhere, or rather of always belonging to the place where they are currently not:

“There is an expression that says: the one that has two homes is never at home. That is what I feel sometimes – I have two homes and still I can’t feel 100% at home in either of them.”

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