



Be Better Neighbours

Irene Ayallo suggests ways we can engage with former refugee people.

THE LIVES OF former refugee communities are intricate, beginning with a complex refugee journey that involves many processes and actors (people). I do not have a lived experience of being a former refugee. I come from an ethnic migrant background. My experience with former refugees stems from engaging with these communities on professional (social work, pastoral care, and community work) and personal levels.

Migrants Different from Refugees

In my experience, not many people understand this journey which often leads to many misconceptions, including using the terms refugee and migrant interchangeably. Although there are some shared experiences between the two groups, their journeys are very different and affect the support needed and provided. Conflating the two groups takes attention away from the specific legal protections that refugees require.

There are specific realities that inform and shape the lives of former

refugees, particularly those who arrive under the Refugee Quota policy. This group is different from Conventional Refugees (Asylum Seekers). Using the concepts “former” and “background” is intentional, highlighting that refugees who arrive in Aotearoa under the Quota programme are granted automatic citizenship on arrival, giving them the same rights as citizens. They cease to be refugees. Therefore, the most accurate and preferred terms include former refugees, refugee backgrounds or resettled communities.

The refugee journey begins with a disruptive event that is life-threatening and forces a person to move outside their country of nationality or habitual residence. This often happens without warning or time to prepare, plan or say goodbye to loved ones. I am from a migrant background, and before making my way to Aotearoa 18 years ago, I had time to plan, say goodbye to my family, and choose the country where I wanted to build a new life.

These choices are not available to

refugees. Often the push factor is so perilous and intolerable that a person, a family together or individually, must cross national borders to seek safety. Returning home is dangerous, and the Refugee Convention further prohibits this.

Refugee Status

War, conflict and persecution continue to be the top causes of displacement. A glance at current global figures as of mid-2022 shows 103 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. 32.5 million of these people are refugees. The refugee status is mandated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), working in about 137 countries.

To be granted refugee status and a chance for resettlement, a person fleeing for safety must go to one of the UNHCR refugee camps for identification. Only one per cent of 32.5 million refugees are resettled yearly, as States are not obligated to accept refugees. It is entirely voluntary.

New Zealand is one of the few



countries that accept and have formalised a refugee resettlement programme. We take an annual quota of 1,500 people. This significant increase happened in July 2018 and was the first since establishing the Quota system in 1987. Before this, the Quota was 750-800 people per year. Many refugee advocates continue to wonder if the country could do more – even double or triple the Quota.

Resettlement Journey

The resettlement journey continues when the selected people arrive in the country, spend six weeks at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, and receive priority housing in the eight regions. Formalised support is provided for 12 months, after which much of the integration process depends on the individual and, if lucky, volunteers within the community.

Barriers to Safe Resettlement

Having a safe place to live is one of the many advantages of resettlement. However, many barriers hinder resettled communities from enjoying this safety fully. A major one is a lack of understanding of the refugee journey, often demonstrated in hostile behaviour and language. People

sometimes think that former refugees have a choice and can “go back to their country”. Or that refugees in the country are taking jobs and houses, which often stems from conflating refugees and migrants. Notably, this is misinformation regarding both groups. Constructing former refugees as the “other” or second-class citizens reinforces racism and discriminatory behaviour. Our role as good neighbours is to advocate for proper and correct information about these communities.

Refugees often arrive without strong support networks, and for most, English is an additional language, making it difficult to access support and critical systems. This can often lead to isolation and contribute to other negative health and well-being outcomes.

Some communities across Aotearoa have devised creative ways of supporting former refugee communities to build strong support networks. These include “English for conversation” gatherings, having vital information in other languages, and supporting and participating in cultural events by these communities.

Don't Ask: “Where Are You From?”

“No, where are you REALLY from?” I want to conclude with a courageous conversation about this common question, which to many appears harmless but to resettled communities, is loaded and often received with racist implications.

To the person asking the question, it may be a genuine conversation starter or a friendly gesture to learn more about the person being asked. To these communities, it is the kind of language that a good neighbour should use cautiously.

To someone who already feels “different” or as the “other”, and often also visibly different because of elements such as skin colour and accent, asking this question has been reported to have harmful (perhaps

unintended) implications. It conveys a strong sense of exclusion. That you look different, so you must not be from here.

The complexity of the refugee journey, leaving the country of origin, staying in the country of asylum, and finally being resettled in a third country, finding a place of belonging is already a struggle. So to ask: “Where are you REALLY from?” can be a painful reminder that they are perpetual outsiders. It causes ambivalence about the place, a feeling of not “authentically” belonging anywhere. Each time the question is asked of resettled communities, they are figuratively returned to the countries of origin, places often filled with sadness and pain for the things that have been lost while fleeing for safety.

Ask: “Where Is Home for You?”

Aotearoa provides former refugees with a new home and an additional identity. Many are proud to embrace their now multiple identities. The assumption embedded in the question “Where are you from?” again categorises resettled communities in terms of pre-migration, denying the many identities they now hold. In my conversation with people from these communities, an alternative question, or conversation starter, would be: “Where is home for you?” Home is much more than where a person was born.

The refugee journey, getting to Aotearoa, and resettlement are complex and highly stressful. Proper knowledge about this journey and the challenges faced can help us support former refugees in establishing a home in Aotearoa. This is what good neighbours do. Help each other find where they belong, are accepted and are included. ✦

Further information:

Amnesty International:
www.tinyurl.com/54pyvu33

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